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Will the *Real* Rural Community Please Stand Up? Staging Rural Community-Based Tourism in Costa Rica

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Abstract

Rural community-based tourism is an increasingly popular way for rural communities in the developing world to preserve their cultural and natural heritage while generating needed income. For this form of tourism to attract sufficient tourist traffic, however, rural communities must attend to tourists' desire for 'authenticity' by carefully staging rurality and community. This article examines how two rural community-based tourism projects in Costa Rica stage, or package their communities for tourist consumption. One project portrays the community as socially cooperative and environmentally conscious, downplaying the growing class tensions and environmental problems that have come to characterize the community. Another project acknowledges community conflicts and environmental degradation but does not fully account for the limits and challenges of rural development. We conclude by discussing the potential of rural community-based tourism to foster economic development in these communities and conversations about the limitations of such development.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, rural development, rural community, staged authenticity, Costa Rica

1.0 Introduction

Rural community-based tourism has long been seen as a way to leverage tourism development for the cultural, environmental and financial benefit of rural communities (Manyara & Jones, 2007). In this approach to tourism development, a community's rural and natural heritage is offered up to tourists in order to both preserve that heritage and generate needed income. The approach has been especially popular in rural communities in the developing world, which face economic marginalization and geographic isolation. Research demonstrates, however, that many of these projects do not get off the ground, and when they do, are not always profitable (Liu, 2006; Lyon, 2013; Sharply, 2002; Trejos & Chiang, 2009). Hence, considerable effort must be made by rural communities to carefully package and market themselves in a way that will attract sufficient tourist traffic. Research indicates that tourists yearn for the culturally 'authentic' and are eager for

a behind-the-scenes look at a place or culture (MacCannell, 1973; Medina, 2003). Thus, to succeed, these tourist projects must offer an authentic rural community experience. But what does it mean to provide tourists a 'real'rural community experience?

MacCannell's notion of *staged authenticity* offers some theoretical insight into this question. To MacCannell (2008), what is or is not culturally authentic is not the pressing question. Rather, the critical question is how locals use costumes, scripts and props to create a *sense* of the authentic. To date, applications of MacCannell's concept have focused on everything from indigenous tourism (Medina, 2003) to ecotourism (West & Carrier, 2004). These studies and others reveal how communities go about staging an 'authentic' tourist encounter that is situated in between theatrical performance and lived reality. Here, we are interested in applying the concept of 'staged authenticity' to rural community-based tourism, wherein staging is arguably more difficult. In contrast to staging a cultural performance or an eco-tour, staging an entire community involves the orchestration of a greater number of people going about their everyday life. It also involves the coordination of a more problematic entity, namely the community, which is characterized by internal divisions and conflicts (Blackstock, 2005).

To explore how rural communities stage a community-based tourist encounter, we consider two community-based tourism projects in Costa Rica, a country with a well-developed tourism infrastructure that has emphasized rural tourism in recent decades. Although each project was conceived and developed in the same national institutional framework, these projects offer a fruitful comparison of how the rural community, as a symbolic entity, is being imagined by different groups of people. As we will suggest, there is no 'real' rural community in rural community-based tourism; there is only a staged community. And what is highlighted and what is hidden about the community has important implications for whether tourism reproduces or challenges contemporary rural issues. In the article that follows, we review some of the research on rural and community-based tourism, describe the case study methods we used to investigate this form of tourism, and present two cases of community-based tourism in coastal Costa Rica.

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Overview of Research

Rural community-based tourism has its roots in the 1980s, when neoliberal ideas of limited government prompted a decline in state spending on rural development in countries around the world. This decline was particularly acute in developing countries, wherein debt servicing to international financial institutions like the World Bank left governments little choice but to eliminate or reduce rural subsidies and assistance. In a context of declining government support, rural communities were compelled to generate revenues on their own, which often meant negotiating volatile and competitive global markets. From growing and exporting ethnic foods (Mannon, 2005), to making artisanal crafts for the global marketplace (Wherry, 2006), to transforming communities into tourist attractions (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012), people in rural areas have attempted to generate household income, jumpstart local economies, and even reclaim cultural traditions. The promise of rural community-based tourism is that it generates income through the preservation of rural lifeways and environmental resources. And the designation of 'community-

based' means that it is an economic endeavor "in which the local community is fully involved…and are the main beneficiaries" (Manyara & Jones, 2007, p. 637).

Rural community-based tourism has proliferated in advanced, industrialized countries like Canada and the United States (e.g., Cai et al., 2018). It has also been pronounced in developing countries, where it typically caters to international tourists who have an interest in and financial capacity to explore far-flung rural destinations outside their home country. Concrete examples abound in the literature, from a community offering homestays in rural Malaysia (Liu, 2006) to a village in Southern China where tourists are charged an entrance fee and revenues are shared by the entire village (Ying & Zhou, 2007). Although seen as a potential basis for rural development, case studies attest to the myriad challenges of this form of tourism, such as poor marketing (Sharpley, 2002), inadequate infrastructure and amenities (Liu, 2006; Salazar, 2012), and limited occupancy and profitability (Lyon, 2013; Trejos & Chiang, 2009). Regarding these problems, Sharpley talks about the importance of having the "total product package," the components of which are of sufficient quality that they match tourist demands and expectations (2002, p. 235). As Sharpley implies, rural destinations must offer sufficient attractions that mark the community as unique and worth the extra travel to a place 'off the beaten path'.

Some scholars refer to the development of a tourist destination as branding (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2007), others as developing a place identity (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). In either case, the process often hinges on catering to what tourists *imagine* the destination to look and feel like (Urry, 1990). Indeed, scholars have long shown that developing a tourist destination does not occur in a vacuum, but in conversation with tourist expectations and imaginations (Medina, 2003; Urry, 1990). Tourists often desire a sense of the culturally authentic and distinct (MacCannell, 1973), which requires that community members cull through their cultural histories to identify landmarks, traditions and activities that will satisfy tourist demands and hold their curiosities. Some scholars argue that communities can maintain or even reclaim cultural traditions under these conditions (Cohen, 1988; Medina, 2003). More often, scholars argue that locals end up behaving in ways that are overly choreographed or forced (Bruner, 2004; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). Even the natural environment can become staged (Honey, 2003; Vivanco, 2001) to the extent that eco-tourist destinations create "landscapes that conform to…Western idealizations of nature" (West & Carrier, 2004, p. 485).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Erving Goffman's theory of the front and backstage self applies to the literature on rural community-based tourism, as scholars have long observed (e.g. Cai et al., 2018; MacCannell, 1973). Goffman (1959) theorized that in our everyday social interactions, we are akin to actors on a stage, performing in ways expected of us and in keeping with social expectations. He distinguished between a *front stage region*, wherein we adhere to others' expectations and more formal rules of conduct, and a *backstage region*, consisting of a more relaxed code of conduct and intimate set of relations. Applying these terms to tourism, MacCannell (1973) posits that tourism provides the façade of a backstage region wherein tourists can peek into more intimate cultural realms. He uses the term 'staged authenticity' to refer to the staging of a local culture to create an impression of authenticity, or more precisely a sense of cultural 'realness' for tourist audiences.

The front and back regions of Goffman's theory may be understood as ideal poles in a tourist setting. On the one end is a purely front region, where the tourist has little interaction with locals, which is the region that "tourists attempt to overcome, or to get behind" (MacCannell, 1973, p. 598). At the other end is a purely back region, which the tourist never can truly access, but which "motivates touristic consciousness" (MacCannel, 1973, p. 598).1 Between the two are front stages decorated to look like back, and back stages set up to accommodate tourists (MacCannell, 2011). MacCannell (2008) clarifies that it is the staging process he is most interested in (i.e., the manipulation of dress, mannerisms, speech and setting to give the impression of a behind-the-scenes glimpse), since from a purely sociological perspective, both the 'real' and 'fake' are symbolically constituted.

2.3 The Present Study

The notion of 'staged authenticity' has been applied to everything from indigenous tourism (Medina, 2003) to poverty tourism (Rofles, 2010) to eco-tourism (West & Carrier, 2004). It has spawned corollary concepts like 'customized authenticity' (Wang, 2007) and 'emergent authenticity' (Cohen, 1988). This conceptual terrain notwithstanding, we are interested in exploring a very simple question as it relates to MacCannell's original formulation, namely how does one stage a rural community for tourism? This question requires careful consideration in at least two respects. To begin, staging an entire rural community requires impression management on a scale that goes far beyond a cultural dance or eco-tour since the rural community itself becomes the tourist attraction. Moreover, what is authentic about rural communities may not always be what is attractive to tourists.

Blackstock (2005) emphasizes the idealization of community by tourists, who imagine the rural community as cohesive and cooperative, made up of individuals and groups with shared interests and statuses. Yet community scholars have long contested these stereotypes, revealing the ethnic, gender and class divisions in rural communities around the world. These divisions are exacerbated by the very act of initiating a community-based tourism project, since there is often an increase in community conflict once the projects are proposed and initiated (Belsky, 1999; Brondo & Woods, 2007; Charnley, 2005; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Stronza, 2001). Given the unequal power relations, the multitude of interests and the uneven distribution of resources in any given community—realities that tourists might very well want to ignore while on vacation—what does it mean to showcase rural community life for a tourist audience? Does one settle for contrived performances that highlight romantic notions of rural cohesion and solidarity? Or does one invite tourists to critically reflect on the less bucolic realities of contemporary rural life, such as widespread poverty and social inequality? We explore these questions with two case studies of rural community-based tourism in Costa Rica.

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[1] For another take on Goffman's front and back region in rural tourism, see Cai, et al. (2018), who argue that urban tourists wanting to escape the pressures of being 'front stage' may find space to explore their 'true self' in the more relaxed back stage environment of a rural community.

3.0 Setting and Methods

3.1 The Case of Costa Rica

In many ways, the nation of Costa Rica is synonymous with tourism development. In just three decades, it has gone from being a small, little known country to a high-profile tourist destination. The country's first hotels catering to tourists date back to the 1930s, when the government also created the National Tourism Board. In 1955, this government body became the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (*Instituto Costariccense de Turismo* [ICT]). The modern push for tourism, however, is rooted in the country's 1981 debt crisis. Declining prices for the country's traditional exports of coffee and bananas and a massive debt default made apparent the need for a more diversified economy. Policymakers who mapped out the country's economic recovery pushed for private sector expansion in new industries, and in international tourism in particular. The approach was successful. In 2015 alone, over 2.6 million tourists visited the country, bringing in an estimated $2.8 billion (Instituto Costariccense de Turismo, 2015). Costa Rica's renown as a tourist destination hinges on its natural resources and social democracy. An extensive national park system has been in place since the 1970s, protecting at least some of the country's rich biodiversity. And the country has packaged itself in ways that emphasize its reputation as a peaceful and democratic Latin American nation (Rivers-Moore, 2007).

Costa Rica's modern tourism sector has developed largely along the 'sun-and-sand' model. But it has also developed a reputation as an eco-tourist destination, offering something different than the standard, all-inclusive beach vacation. In addition, the ICT has promoted what it calls 'community rural tourism' in an effort to extend the benefits of tourism to rural communities. To this end, the ICT developed a community tourism training program and a collective liability insurance policy for communities interested in developing tourism. Alongside these efforts, non-governmental organizations began to promote community-based tourism. Two of the most prominent non-governmental organizations in this regard are the Costa Rican Association of Community-Based Rural Tourism (*Asociación Costarricense de Turismo Rural Comunitario* [ACTUAR]) and the National Ecotourism Network Cooperative Consortium (*Consorcio Cooperativo Red Ecoturística Nacional* [COOPRENA]). Affiliated with these government and non-governmental organizations are a slew of community-based organizations that have initiated tourism projects in specific rural communities. In 2007, there were around seventy such organizations operating in the country (Trejos & Chiang, 2009). A few case studies of these organizations exist (Jackiewicz, 2006; Trejos & Chiang, 2009; Wherry, 2006). But given their centrality to community rural tourism in Costa Rica, more are needed.

3.2 Case Selection and Data Collection

In 2005, we became interested in rural community-based tourism as a potential basis for rural development. The first author had studied rural development in Costa Rica (Mannon, 2005), but had focused primarily on small farmers growing non-traditional agricultural exports. Rural community-based tourism was similar in topic in that it fit within entrepreneurial models of development and had arisen in the same socio-historical context of neoliberal restructuring. Our research in 2005 was exploratory, intended to give us an idea of the potential and pitfalls of this form of tourism. Methodologically, we used a case study research design, which is not

intended to make causal inferences or produce generalizable data, but to provide an in-depth exploration of some phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin, 2013). The question guiding our study was how members of a community imagined their history, culture, and environment as a tourist product, and not simply as a place and a people to which they belonged. This question had both practical implications for how their community was marketed to potential tourists, and theoretical implications for how the 'rural community' was conceived.

With little published research on the community-based organizations undergirding community rural tourism in Costa Rica, we did not select our cases until we were in the country. We began our research conducting informational interviews with contacts in ICT and with the executive directors of the two most prominent non-governmental organizations in community rural tourism in Costa Rica: COOPRENA and ACTUAR. Because the history and structure of these organizations were different (see the results below), we hypothesized that the organizational leadership and affiliation structure of COOPRENA and ACTUAR might make affiliated projects more or less entrepreneurial, commercial and/or 'top-down'. Hence, we decided to select one case associated with COOPRENA and one case associated with ACTUAR. Aside from selecting one project affiliated with each of these organizations, we focused on field sites that had vacancies for the weeks that followed and that were at a reasonable distance from the capital of San José, where our informational interviews took place. Thus, our sampling technique was not random and was of a purposive and convenience nature.[2] The two sites we selected were Coopesilencio, which is a cooperative affiliated with COOPRENA that runs a lodge near the country's central Pacific coast, and Amistad Lodge, which is a women-run lodge affiliated with ACTUAR that sits on an island off the country's northwest peninsula.

Once we had selected our cases, we traveled to each destination for a week of intense field observations and unstructured interviews. Case study research uses multiple sources of evidence, namely observations, interviews and documents. We collected all three types of data for each case study. During our stay in each locale, we stayed in the lodge, ate alongside tourists and locals, and participated in community-based tours and activities. Observations were made of virtually everything we saw while traveling to and visiting each destination. Observations were made with pen and notepad and were typed up nightly by the authors. Interviews were unstructured and conducted in the field with anyone who was available and willing to talk. (See Table 1 for a list of interviewees.) Interviews focused on the respondent's experiences with and perceptions of the tourist project; the history of the tourist project and the community; the challenges and tensions in the community that arose around the tourist project; and what 'story' of the rural community was conveyed by each project. The interviews ranged from one to three hours and, for key informants (i.e., project managers) occurred over multiple days. Because interviews were unstructured and informal, we neither audio-recorded nor transcribed them. Instead, we took notes with pen and paper and typed up the notes nightly on a laptop.

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[2] The logistical questions that influenced our case selection (vacancy and distance) might have introduced some bias to the extent that they favored sites that had higher vacancy rates and were closer to the capital. Most of the sites affiliated with COOPRENA and ACTUAR, however, had vacancies, possibly due to the nascent nature of community rural tourism in Costa Rica. As for the closer distance to the capital, we reasoned that sites closer to the capital were likely to attract more tourists and, hence, were more illustrative of the potential of community rural tourism.

Table 1: *List of Interview Participants*

Interview participants in El Silencio		
Male	Costa Rican	Project manager; tourist guide
Male	Costa Rican	Wage worker
Female	US American	Tourist-volunteer (long term)
Male	US American	Tourist (short term)
Male	Canadian	Tourist-volunteer (long term)
Female	Costa Rican	Community member
Female	Costa Rican	Community member
Interview participants in Isla de Chira		
Female	Costa Rican	Project manager; tourist guide
Female	Costa Rican	Project manager; tourist guide
Female	Costa Rican	Project manager; tourist guide
Male	Costa Rican	Tourist guide
Female	Costa Rican	Tourist (short term)
Female	Finish	Tourist (long term)
Male	Costa Rican	Community member
Female	Costa Rican	Community member

Finally, we collected documents associated with the communities and projects, including all promotional material for the tourist activities and accommodations, guide book entries for the destinations, printouts of the websites and blogs run by the project, newspaper articles and development reports related to the project or the community, and published research on the communities. All typed observational notes, interview notes, and printed documents were read by both authors and coded for themes, which we used to develop and organize an interpretation of the data.[3] In the analysis that follows, we discuss how these projects got started and evolved over time. In each of the cases we analyze, the tourist product is the rural community itself. Thus, understanding how these projects packaged and performed community is key. What images and ideas of the rural community are put 'on stage' for the tourist gaze? What realities and aspects of rural community life remain hidden 'backstage'? And what are the implications for the tourist project and for rural development more generally? These are the research questions guiding this study.

[3] The analysis of observational and interview data for themes and interpretations is standard in qualitative research. For coding and analyzing documents, see Bowen (2009).

4.0 Results

4.1 The Case of Coopesilencio

4.1.1. Structure and history of the organization. The first case we consider is a community-based tourism project affiliated with COOPRENA. COOPRENA is a non-profit established in Costa Rica in the mid-1990s to develop and promote alternative tourism in rural communities.[4] In addition to providing training and technical assistance to community organizations, COOPRENA procures grants for tourism development and funnels them to these organizations. Once tourism destinations have been created, COOPRENA takes a leading role in marketing the destination to tour operators and tourists. In addition to operating a web page, COOPRENA organizes vacation packages through its own tour operation known as Simbiosis Tours. In 2012, COOPRENA had twenty-three cooperative affiliates throughout the country. As a rule, these affiliates must be cooperatives or development organizations that benefit the larger community. Affiliates pay an initial fee and annual dues to COOPRENA. Twenty percent of their tourism profits must go to COOPRENA to cover administrative and marketing costs.

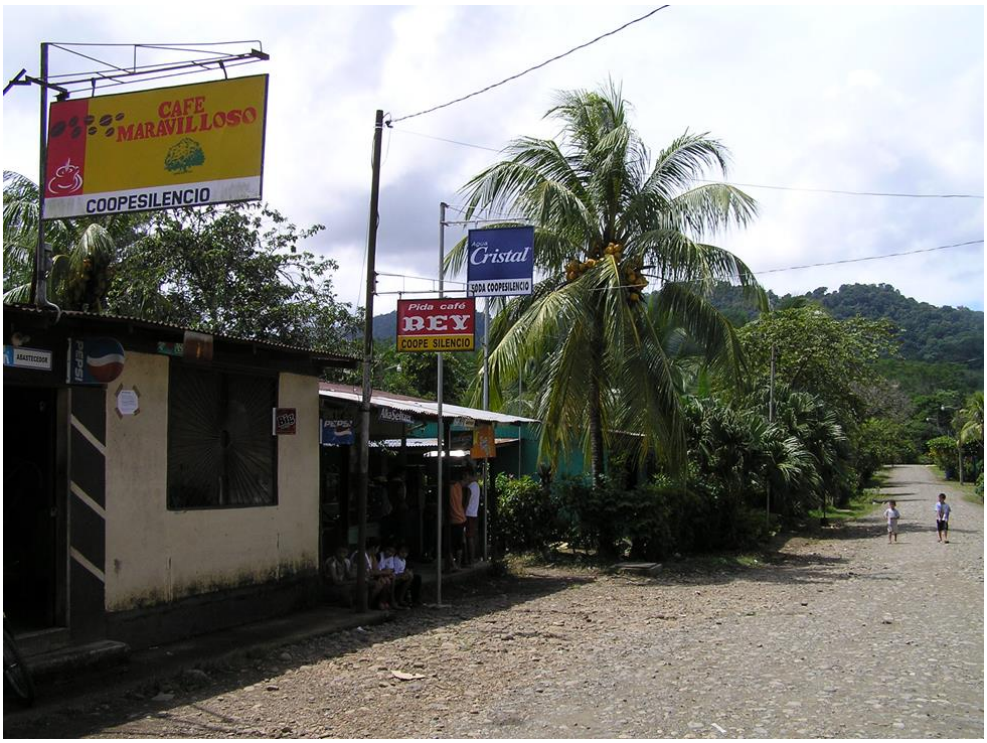
One of COOPRENA's affiliates is Coopesilencio, which is located in a village called *El Silencio on Costa Rica's central Pacific coast (see Figure 1). The major economic* activity in this area is African palm oil production. But given the village's proximity to beaches and a national park, another major employer is tourism. Coopesilencio was founded in 1973, but its history stretches back much further.[5] In the mid-20th century, the United Fruit Company (UFC) owned numerous banana plantations in the area, which were abandoned after a devastating flood in 1955. After a protracted struggle, a group of former UFC workers who had been squatting on the land won rights to the abandoned property, giving them ownership of some 592 hectares. In 1973, 42 of these individuals formed a cooperative called Coopesilencio. By the 1980s, much of the surrounding area had been converted to African palm plantations, owned and operated mostly by multinational corporations. In 1985, Coopesilencio began planting its own African palm. The cooperative also started a store, a wood processing plant, and a dairy farm. In the mid-1990s, the cooperative received funding from COOPRENA and other donors to build a tourist lodge (see Figure 2). The lodge now consists of ten cabins with indoor plumbing, as well as a swimming pool and a restaurant and bar. Altogether, the lodge can accommodate 45 visitors.

The location of El Silencio is a fortuitous one in that it is relatively close to one of Costa Rica's most popular national parks. Manuel Antonio National Park is located on Costa Rica's central Pacific coast just south of the town of Quepos, itself a bustling tourist hub about 130 kilometers from San José. El Silencio sits 35 kilometers inland from Quepos, providing a number of workers to the busy hotels and restaurants that dot the highway between Quepos and the park. Although relatively close to this tourist activity, the village is sufficiently

[4] Information about COOPRENA was provided by Katya Perez Chacón, then Director of Operations at COOPRENA, in an interview on June 29, 2005. Some of this history can also be found on the organization's webpage (http://www.turismoruralcr.com/).
[5] Information about Coopesilenco was provided by Juan Carlos Bejarano, administrator of the lodge at El Silencio, in interviews between June 30 and July 2, 2005.

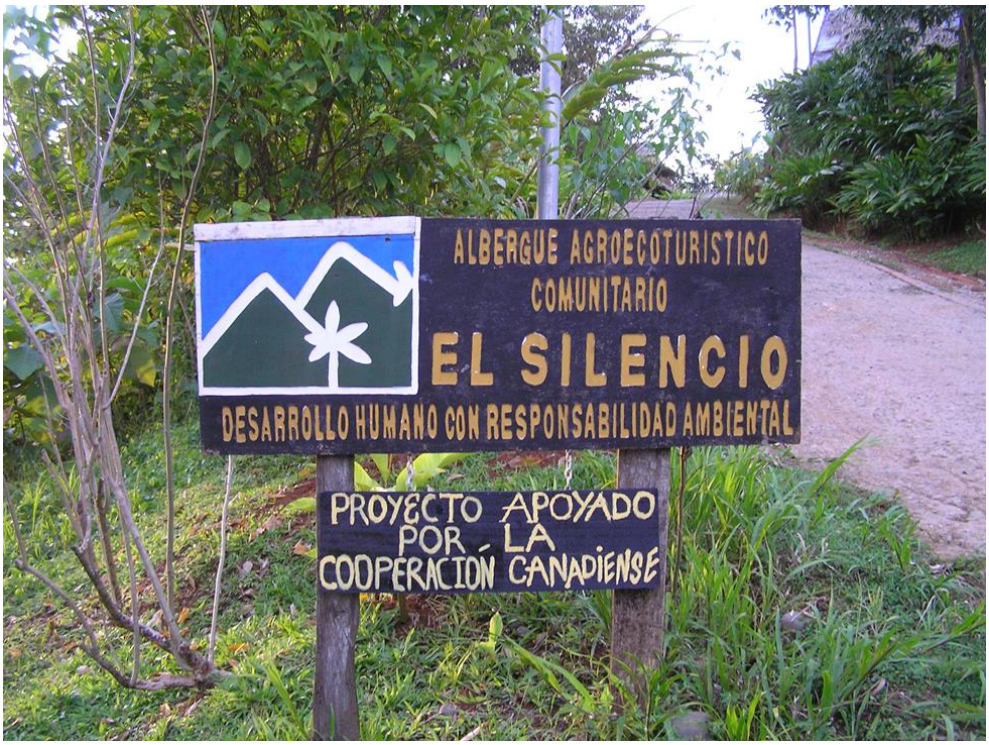
remote to give the area a feeling of being off-the-beaten path. Within its boundaries are a number of rivers and waterfalls, as well as hundreds of acres of rain forest. The village itself consists of 480 people, two churches, a soccer field, a small store and lunch stand, a state-run health center, an elementary and high school, and the offices of Coopesilencio. The lodge and cabins sit atop a hill overlooking the village and the forests beyond. A look at the guest registry suggested decent, but limited tourist traffic. By our calculations, an average of 90 visitors were arriving each month that year, two-thirds of them traveling from other parts of Costa Rica and one-third from abroad. Of the foreign visitors, most came individually or in pairs from countries like Canada and the United States. The average stay was one to two days. The lodge employs three salaried workers, all of them members of Coopesilencio, who earn about three times the minimum wage. It also employs various wage workers from the community who make minimum wage and who are not members of the cooperative. Profits from the lodge are reinvested in the cooperative's productive activities and/or are distributed among the members.

Figure 1. The Village of El Silencio.



Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 06/30/2005.

Figure 2. Coopesilencio's Tourism Project.



Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 06/30/2005.

4.1.2. Aspects of rural community highlighted front stage. The tourist project initiated by Coopesilencio in the mid-1990s was constructed explicitly around the principles of community-based tourism. As the cooperative's blog reads: "Community-based ecotourism…provides incentive for landowners to protect native flora and fauna and educate the community about the natural wonders of their region. Coopesilencio`s agro-tourism model…educates about rural ways of life" (Coopesilencio Costa Rica n.d.) The mission statement of its tourism project is etched in a wooden sign hanging prominently in its open-air restaurant, declaring Coopesilencio's intent to "produce and commercialize agroforestry products and offer rest and recreation through rural and environmental tourism." A rural and environmental aesthetic ran throughout the design and décor of the cabins with their palm-thatched roofs and simple cement floors (see Figure 3). Dotting the walls of both the cabins and restaurant were black and white photographs of the founding members of Coopesilencio, standing with machetes and shovels in hand against a backdrop of thick rainforest. Tourist activities centered on rural life and the natural environment. Just behind the lodge, for example, a nature trail invited visitors to explore the rainforest. In addition to hiking, visitors can tour the village or volunteer in the community. Visitors can take these tours on their own or be given a tour by the manager of the lodge, who is also a member of the cooperative.

Figure 3. Rustic Cabins of Coopesilencio.

Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 06/30/2005.

The physical presence of the lodge and restaurant, the tourist traffic it generated and its association with a cooperative that is the historic lifeblood of this area meant that members of the community who were not affiliated with the project and did not financially benefit from it were at least familiar with it. Tours of the community, one of the key tourist attractions, brought tourists in contact with everyday community members in the health center, at the school, and in the commercial and religious establishments. During our own tour, community members in the health clinic, secondary school, and corner store patiently stopped to talk with us about such matters as work, education, and the environment. The community's familiarity with the cooperative's tourism project and its cooperation with tourists was crucial because, in many ways, Coopesilencio marketed itself *as* the community and not as a cooperative *in* the community. Its website, for example, proclaims: "Community-based ecotourism is a very important source of economic growth for *communities like Coopesilencio*" (Coopesilencio Costa Rica, n.d., emphasis our own). This language mirrors COOPRENA's marketing material for the lodge, which describes the lodge as "the dream of an entire community" (COOPRENA, 2012). In both cases, the community and Coopesilencio are interchangeable, though the cooperative itself only represents 41 of the 480 community residents (Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo, 2017).[6] On our final night at the lodge, the staff set up an outdoor movie screen on which they projected a cartoon for some 25 children from the village that had been invited for movie night. Following the film, they invited visitors at the lodge to watch a

[6] The website for the lodge says that the cooperative represents 80 families and, by extension, 500 people in the community (Coopesilencio, 2017). But the directory of cooperatives published by the *Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo* (INFOCOOP) indicates only 41 associates, a number corroborated by at least one other study (Fasciani, 2014).

documentary called "Hijos del Silencio" ("Children of El Silencio"), which traced the history of Coopesilencio. The juxtaposition of the children watching the movie and the title of the documentary had the effect, again, of blurring the lines between cooperative and community.

In addition to emphasizing its community-based nature, Coopesilencio celebrates the natural environment and rural lifeways. Its webpage states that, in 1973, the local farm workers who had been granted land rights by the government decided to "set up the cooperative as an ecotourism project" (Coopesilencio Costa Rica, n.d.) But as the manager of the lodge explained, the decision to start a tourism project actually occurred some two decades later when the cooperative was looking to diversify its economic activities. Up until that point, Coopesilencio had been involved almost exclusively with planting and harvesting African palm, which it sent for processing in nearby plants owned and operated by multinational corporations. African palm production remains a mainstay of the cooperative's economic activity and a tour of the crop is included in the list of tourist activities. But tours also highlight sideline economic activities in which the cooperative has become involved since the mid-1990s, including a wood shop and an organic farm. Other tours are more eco-conscious and conservation-oriented, such as the bird watching tour and a tour of the cooperative's Animal Rescue Center, which rehabilitates injured wild animals. Finally, in 2010, the cooperative began hosting the National Fair of the Creole Hen (*La Feria Nacional de la Gallina Criolla*), which celebrates the use of cage-free hens as a healthy food alternative and disappearing rural tradition (Sánchez, 2010). At the heart of Coopesilencio's tourism project, then, are themes of community cohesion, environmental sustainability and rural tradition.

4.1.3. Aspects of rural community hidden backstage. Although Coopesilencio's tourism 'face' emphasizes community, ecological and rural harmony, the cooperative's participation in African palm production looms large behind the scenes. The cooperative is now the second largest producer of African palm fruit in the area, with over 530 hectares under cultivation (Fasciani, 2014, p. 88). The African palm industry is notorious for the destruction of forests and biodiversity throughout Costa Rica's coastal communities (Vijay, Pimm, Jenkins, & Smith, 2016). The industry has also been linked to a loss of smallholding agriculture, the displacement of rural populations, and, because it is a classic case of monoculture, rising food insecurity (McMichael, 2009). Perhaps for this reason, Coopesilencio's webpage is silent about the centrality of African palm production to the cooperative's economic activity. Although the cooperative has diversified its economic activities, interviews with cooperative members indicated that none of these activities come close to the earning capacity of African palm fruit. This makes for a paradoxical situation: the mainstay of this cooperative's economic activity—producing African palm fruit—erodes the very foundation of its tourism venture—promoting a sustainable rural way of life.

The cooperative's African palm fruit production is important in at least one other respect. Fasciani (2014) found that though Coopesilencio was founded on the principles of worker self-management, the cooperative has intensified its employment of non-cooperative workers (known as *particulares*) in order to expand its production of African palm fruit. Estimates of the number of *particulares* employed by the cooperative range from 50 to 80, demonstrating that they are at least equal to and possibly as much as twice the number of actual cooperative

members.[7] In the past, such contractual labor was temporary in nature and more pronounced during the seasonal harvest when more labor hands were needed. But today's use of *particulares* has become more persistent and consistent, with some *particulares* employed for up to 15 years or more (Fasciani, 2014, p. 94). Thus, over time, labor relations in the field have looked less cooperative and more capitalist. According to Fasciani "the cooperative has effectively maintained a closed membership [since 2000, with the majority of members citing the] necessity of checks on membership growth" (Fasciani, 2014, p. 94). This state of affairs has embittered many people in the community, since they want to enjoy the benefits of membership and not merely wage work (Fasciani, 2014).

There is a gender dimension to these increasingly conflictive class relations in that women are much more likely to be employed by the cooperative than a member of the cooperative. Of the 41 cooperative members, only four are women. When asked why men were overrepresented in the cooperative, the manager of the lodge explained that agricultural activities predominated in the cooperative and were so physically laborious that men were better suited for the work. Indeed, the rules for membership require that prospective members must have the capacity to work in all of the cooperative's activities, including African palm fruit production (Fasciani, 2014). Women *particulares* typically concentrate on collecting the palm fruit after it has been severed from the tree. It is viewed as separate and distinct from the work done by men, which centers on the application of agrochemicals and the cutting of the palm fruit from the tree. Women's long history of work on behalf of the cooperative, therefore, has not translated into membership in the cooperative. Even so, the manager of the lodge argued that "providing work for the female workforce" was one of the cooperative's major accomplishments and central aims, a claim supported by the cooperative's mission statement, which indicated the cooperative's intent to "incorporate women…in the productive process".

4.2 The Case of Amistad Lodge

4.2.1. Structure and history of the organization. Like Coopesilencio, our second case study was an affiliate of a national tourism network, in this case ACTUAR. ACTUAR traces its origins back to 2001 when various women's, indigenous, and rural groups came together at an ecotourism conference organized by the United Nations Small Grants Program. The groups decided to form a network that would allow them to expand and professionalize their rural community tourism ventures.[8] In the beginning, ACTUAR was more like a committee, consisting of a hired consultant and representatives from the fifteen community organizations. Over time, the organizations decided to formalize ACTUAR, which gained an executive director, a staff, and a Board of Directors consisting of representatives from the community affiliates. Like COOPRENA, ACTUAR promotes its affiliated rural tourism projects through brochures, a website, and its own travel agency known as ACTUAR Rural Adventures. ACTUAR also provides training and assistance to

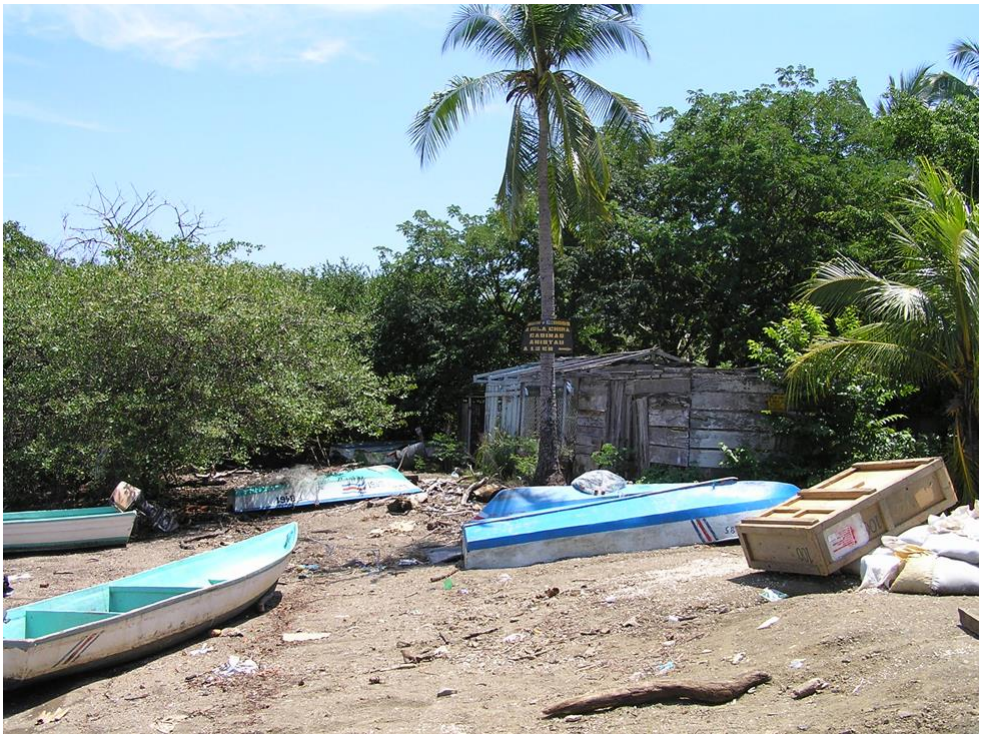
[7] Fasciani (2014) notes the difficulty in getting reliable estimates of the number of *particulares* owing to state regulations against the extensive use of non-member labor in cooperatives. Costa Rica's Ley de Asociaciones Cooperativas restricts the number of non-cooperative hired labor to 30 percent of the number of associates. As Fasciani (2014, p. 93) notes, this would limit Coopesilencio to hiring a mere twelve hourly workers.

[8] Information about ACTUAR was provided by Kyra Cruz, then Executive Director of ACTUAR, in an interview on June 27, 2005. Some of this history can also be found on the organization's webpage (http://www.actuarcostarica.com/).

communities, helping them design products, set prices, and recruit guides. In 2005, it consisted of twenty-eight affiliated groups, which has since grown to forty. To affiliate, community groups must provide a statement that they will work in a way that supports the cultural and natural environment, as well as an initial fee and annual dues. Twenty percent of the profits from tourism go to ACTUAR.

Among ACTUAR's more celebrated projects is a woman-run tourism project on an island called Chira (population 3,000), located in the Gulf of Nicoya in Costa Rica's Pacific northwest (see Figure 4). It is accessible only by boat, with two passenger ferries operating daily to the mainland. Historically, fishing has been the island's economic mainstay and remains so today. But in the past two decades, this economic activity has been threatened as commercial fishing and environmental degradation have reduced the stock of fish in the surrounding waters. In response, a group of ten women from the island banded together to initiate a micro-enterprise. The women attended a meeting organized by the United Nations Small Grants Program, which provides small grants for community development projects. The women considered a chicken farm but reasoned that no one on the island would be able to afford chickens. So, they settled on a rural tourism project. In 2000, the women formalized the group as the Women's Ecotourism Association of Chira (*Asociación Ecoturística Damas de Chira*, [AEDC]).[9] Their idea was to generate income by preserving rather than exploiting the natural resources of the island.

Figure 4. The Island of Chira.



Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 07/05/2005.

[9] Information about AEDC and Amistad Lodge was provided by Teodora Medina and Isabel Cruz Díaz, two founding members of AEDC, in interviews from July 4-6, 2005. Some of this history can also be found on the webpage of Amistad Lodge (http://www.turismoislachira.com/index.php/en/).

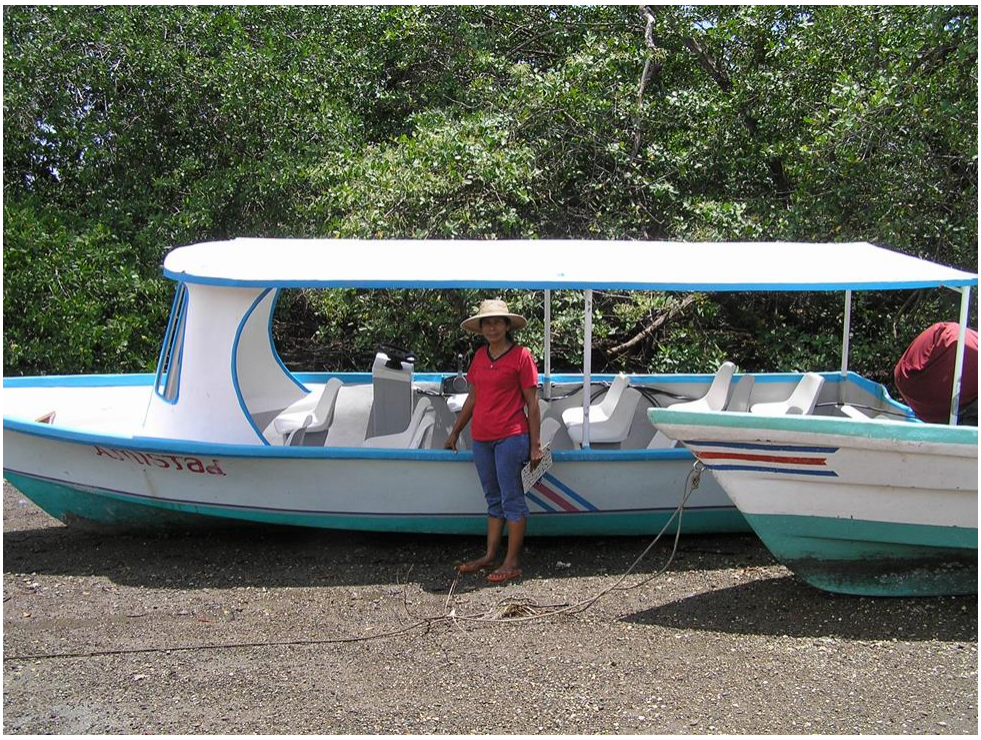
In the beginning, the women planned to have tourists stay in their homes. They realized, however, that they did not have the amenities to accommodate tourists in this way. So, they decided to solicit funding to construct a lodge and acquired access to a small plot of land on which they built Amistad (Friendship) Lodge (see Figure 5).[10] The women sought and received funding from a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations. They also received assistance and training from the Costa Rican National Learning Institute and the Women's Studies Institute at National University. In addition to the lodge, the women built a small restaurant and boats to transport tourists around the island (see Figure 6). Today, Amistad Lodge sits a short walk from a central dirt road that cuts across the island. It consists of six rooms with a total capacity for 36 people. The rooms feature private bathrooms with working toilets, sinks and showers. Tourist activities include visiting a bird sanctuary on a neighboring island, a tour of the local mangroves, artisanal fishing tours, mountain biking through the island, and handicraft lessons. Although there are beaches, most are not of the sunbathing variety, featuring murky water and the occasional crocodile. Tours are provided by the women members of AEDC or their husbands. AEDC also invites other women's groups to come to the lodge to give craft lessons and sell jewelry. During our visit, the lodge was at half capacity. We met a group of three Costa Ricans, a Finnish volunteer, a couple from Spain, and a group of ten U.S. missionaries.

Figure 5. Amistad Lodge.

Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 07/05/2005.

[10] Under the 1977 Maritime Zone Law (No. 6043), all of Costa Rica's islands are considered state property, with the right to island residence granted to individuals who had resided on an island for ten years at the time the law was passed. In contradiction to the law, the government gave out property titles to residents of Chira Island in the 1980s. Then, in 2006, the government suspended the collection of property taxes. Thus many landowners on the island are not certain whether they have legitimate title to their land (Trejos & Chiang, 2009).

Figure 6. AEDC Boats.



Source: Photograph taken by Bonnie Glass-Coffin, 07/05/2005.

4.2.2. Aspects of rural community highlighted front stage. The women of AEDC tell a particular story about themselves that is consistent across their printed material, website, and interviews. The story centers on a small group of women who overcame community skepticism, men's disapproval and their own lack of confidence to create a tourism project that would at once generate income and protect the environment. The organization's website explains that "the first phase was the most difficult, convincing ten women to form an organization in spite of a culture that did not look kindly on women leading the community" (La Posada la Amistad, 2015). Indeed, when the women of AEDC first began exploring a tourism venture, community members were wary. According to one woman we interviewed: "When we started talking about tourism, [the community] turned on us. They were scared of prostitution and casinos." One neighbor went so far as to contact the country's child protective services to charge the women with child neglect. "They said we were not good mothers," the same woman explained. Rather than sidestep the complicated relationship this organization had to the community, however, AEDC made community tensions a centerpiece of its narrative. In contrast to Coopesilencio, which drew on notions of the harmonious rural community, AEDC drew on the realities of community conflict to paint itself as a community underdog.

Of particular note were the conflicts that the women experienced with the men in the community. During our interviews, the women recalled that when they started building boats for the project, a group of fishermen laughed at them, predicting that the boats would sink. One woman smiled with pride when she told us of the day that they brought the first group of tourists over on these boats while the fishermen watched. The women of AEDC also had to overcome resistance and opposition among male family members, who did not want them to work outside of the home

and were skeptical of them going to the city for training. "They said that we were street women [*callajeras*], complaining 'Oh, look how much they go to the city.'" But the story that AEDC told to the tourists, students, journalists, and conservationists who made their way to the island was ultimately one of triumph. The women persevered despite the naysayers. "Women of Chira Take Control of Destiny" headlined one newspaper article; "The Visionaries of the Gulf" read another.[11] One of the women of AEDC recounted a day after the lodge had been open for a year when a group of fishermen came to the women to apologize for not supporting them. "They came here asking for our forgiveness for the time they did not support us, saying 'Now we are proud of you'" she remembered. "They went so far as to ask our advice on how to start something similar."[12] Hence, the story becomes one of women's empowerment, with the women "facing their fear [and realizing] their dreams of improving the quality of life of their families and the community as a whole" (La Posada Amistad, 2015).

If community and gender conflict loom large in the story that AEDC tells about itself, so too does environmental degradation. In contrast to Coopesilencio, which has been silent about the problems besetting the major economic activity in the region (i.e., African palm production), AEDC emphasizes the ecological problems associated with the fishing industry that have prompted its investment in tourism. Specifically, the island's renowned mangroves have been overharvested for firewood and degraded by commercial fishing, decimating the stock of fish once protected by the mangroves. The depletion of fish, in turn, has dried up the main source of income on the island (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], 2014). AEDC, therefore, promotes a return to artisanal, hand-line fishing off the west coast of the island, where it has carved out a space for responsible fishing (Chavez Carillo, Partelow, Madrigal-Ballestero, Schlüter, & Gutierrez-Montes, 2019). The group also received training from a public university in Costa Rica in mangrove restoration (IUCN, 2014). Both activities have given the organization a reputation, and hence funding for ecological conservation and sustainable development (IUCN, 2014). Outside the organization's kitchen, for example, sit solar heating panels that were donated by a European non-governmental organization, which the women of AEDC used for heating everything from black beans to hand towels. Their website lists other ways in which they take a leading role in environmental stewardship and conservation, including solid waste management, secondary forest protection, and community environmental education (La Posada Amistad, 2015).

4.2.3. Aspects of rural community hidden back-stage. By the time AEDC affiliated with other community-based groups to form ACTUAR, the group had dwindled from ten to six women. Another three women eventually left the group. According to the three women still affiliated with the project, the women who left were exhausted from getting the project off the ground. Walking through the thick jungle brush surrounding the lodge, we got the sense of what it must have taken for the women to clear the land and build the lodge. It also took the women many years to see a financial payoff. It was only in 2005, four years after the construction of the lodge, that the women began receiving a salary. This information is important in at

[11] The first title comes from a *Tico Times* article on June 18, 2004 (http://ww.ticotimes.net/2004/06/18/women-of-chira-take-control-of-destiny), the second from an article in *La Nación* on April 15, 2001 (http://www.nacion.com/dominical/2001/abril/15/dominical0.html).
[12] The same story is told in a conservation blog about AEDC (Quesada, 2014).

least two respects. First, it suggests the financial limitations of community-based rural tourism, which often requires considerable investment but does not generate large profits. Community-based rural tourism, of course, is generally understood to supplement local incomes. But even as part of a package of economic activities, it is difficult to eke out a living with this form of tourism on Chira Island. As late as 2014, for example, the group was still receiving donor funding.[13]

The limitations to membership and profit in this case are important in one other respect. Though these women were precisely the kind of people that rural community-based tourism champions (i.e., disadvantaged on account of gender, rurality, and income), AEDC, at just three members, could not and did not claim to represent a large swath of the community. To be sure, community-based tourist projects never involve every member of a community. As Trejos and Chiang (2009) argue, to get off the ground, this form of tourism must be organized and operated by a group of individuals rather than a community per se. In their words, "[community-Based Tourism] in practice, is not the collective property of the community, but instead the collective property of a group organized in a formal association" (Trejos & Chiang, 2009, p. 383). This presents something of a paradox since these projects are understood to be 'community-based'. Again, the women of AEDC incorporated the lack of community support into their origin story. But ultimately it is a story with a happy ending. "The perspective of the community changed when they saw our success," one woman in the organization explained. Having community support, however, is not the same as benefiting the community or having broad community input.

Trejos and Chiang (2009) argue that small community-based tourist projects like AEDC may benefit the larger community by creating economic linkages. For example, they may purchase supplies from local vendors—'backward linkages'—as well as bring in tourists who might purchase goods and services from the local economy—forward linkages'. But in their own study of AEDC and the Chira Island economy, these authors found that these linkages were sporadic and not well distributed across the island. With the exception of hiring a night watchman, the women of AEDC also did all the work of the lodge (e.g., cooking, cleaning, etc.) themselves. One of the women's husbands provided tours of the island on one of the boats, but he was not paid a wage. Rather, the profits from the lodge benefited him indirectly through household income. As a boon to the local economy, then, Amistad Lodge is no panacea. It is merely an enterprise that is helping three women keep their families afloat.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

If, according to MacCannell, the front stage and backstage are two ends of a continuum between which tourism projects are situated, where might we find the case studies analyzed here? Let us first consider the case of Coopesilencio. Arguably, Coopesilencio markets itself in a way that better resembles what it once was: a group of former plantation-workers engaged in a daring experiment of communal living and self-management. Over time, that reality has eroded as the cooperative has come to look more capitalist. What Coopesilencio has done well is to leverage the historic role and elevated status of its cooperative members to control

[13] Information on recent funding is available on the UN Small Grants Program webpage (http://www.pequenasdonacionescr.org/es/premio-benson-venegas-2012-damas-de-chira).

the narrative of rural community-based tourism. From the carefully placed black-and-white photos of a community that once was, to tours of vegetable gardens and chicken coops, to the well-crafted website that transforms wage workers into community members, Coopesilencio has staged a sense of communitarianism that has the look and feel of a cooperative community. Though tourists may see glimpses of backstage life by peeking into schools and health clinics, they are not made aware of the deep and gendered class conflicts that have arisen in this community, or the monoculture on which it is dependent. It is a front stage dressed up as backstage, but without the messy social conflicts and economic realities defining this rural community.

A more pronounced backstage tour is provided by the women of AEDC, who have constructed their own careful narrative, one that exposes many of the gender conflicts, environmental problems, and economic difficulties facing them. Rather than paint their island as an eco-paradise or their lifeway in terms of rural tradition, the women of AEDC emphasized their struggle to adapt and cope with environmental destruction and a fading way of life. From the perspective of the women of AEDC, this community was neither homogenous nor harmonious. It was like any rural community, with varied interests and deeply rooted problems that did not always make for a glossy tourist brochure. At the same time, Amistad Lodge was no backstage; the women of AEDC maintained tight control of the narrative and the space through which it was conveyed. In their story, the men had finally come around, the mangroves were rebounding, and the community was beginning to see the benefit of preserving rather than exploiting the natural environment. Thus, even in this case, tourists were never asked to confront the limitations of women's microenterprise and a poor island economy.

Both cases reveal the gendered nature of rural community-based tourism. From Coopesilencio, wherein women were wageworkers disguised as community members, to AEDC, with its tale of fearless women who transformed a community, women's labor and secondary status were central. This should come as no surprise. Historically, women's work in the home and the community has been both valorized and ignored, especially in rural communities where their reproductive and productive labor has helped sustain families and communities during economic downturns (Petrzelka & Mannon, 2006). Seen as the self-sacrificing backbone of the family and the community, women are often expected to make ends meet and resources stretch. Both projects play on these notions and celebrate the independent access to income that women gain, in El Silencio through their wage work and on Chira through their microenterprise. But these gains come at the cost of reproducing women's role as secondary wage workers and low- or unpaid caregivers. And though these projects allow women to earn income, it may never be enough income to transform their lives or the communities around them.

An important question remains about what version of the rural community tourists want to see. Do tourists want to see the social inequalities, economic marginalization and environmental problems endemic in rural communities around the world? Or do they want to experience an *imagined* rural community that is egalitarian, bucolic, and sustainable? The cases of Coopesilencio and Chira suggest that tourists might be satisfied with both. But if the purpose of community-based tourism is to distribute the benefits of tourism more widely and to reimagine the purpose of tourism, a tourist encounter that is more backstage instead of front might lend itself to more provocative conversations about the plight of rural peoples. Indeed, there are consequences for how we conceptualize the rural community in tourism—

consequences that go far beyond whether a tourism project is financially sustainable or not. Community-based tourism offers a space wherein the tourist might reckon not simply with the culturally authentic, but with the texture of uneven development. In this regard, the women of AEDC might give tourists a glimpse of 'real' rural life, but they cannot change that reality. In a world of dwindling government resources and tenuous tourist dollars, rural community-based tourism may simply not be enough.

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