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# **Working with Indigenous Women on Multifunctionality and Sustainable Rural Tourism in Western Mexico**

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## **Abstract**

Currently, globalization is recognized as a process that has many negative effects on the Mexican countryside. These effects include the disconnection of peasants and indigenous people from the national and international economies, poverty, deterioration of natural resources and agrodiversity, loss of local knowledge and traditions, and cultural transformations.

Although globalization has many negative effects, increasing numbers of peasants and indigenous people are looking for alternative livelihood strategies. These strategies aim to make better use of local resources while also allowing relatively autonomous production methods. The activities of these actors fall within different links of the productive chain; these links are production, transformation, commercialization, and consumption. The responses of the local actors could be considered to represent a new emergent rurality. The responses also have in common a revalorization of the multifunctional character of the Mexican countryside.

This article describes the experiences of a group of indigenous women farmers with rural tourism. This group, called “*Color de Tierra*” (Color of the Earth), has been working on ecological agriculture since 1995. Since 2005, this group has incorporated new activities to regulate the increasing number of tourists that have been visiting the community. The experiences of the group occur in those rural development alternatives that aim at strengthening the multifunctionality of the Mexican countryside. This group incorporates its experiences from the specific local context where it develops its activities, which is also an example of the generation of new alternatives that allow re-localization of the rural life conditions that are threatened by the forces of globalization.

Keywords: Rural tourism, multifunctionality, Mexico, endogenous rural development

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The negative effects of globalization on the Mexican countryside are well described. These effects are characterized by the multi-dimensionality of the countryside, with not only economic consequences but also socio-cultural and ecological repercussions. The latter are associated with various issues related to rural life and production, such as the quality of the rural producers' lives, identities and traditional practices and sustainable natural resource management (Cortez et al., 1994; Schwentesius et al., 2003; Esteva & Marielle, 2003). Additionally, reference is made to the transnational nature of the problem, emphasizing the involvement of processes that go beyond regional and national territories (Halweil, 2002; Schwentesius et al., 2003).

The negative effects of globalization have led scientists and practitioners to conduct a critical assessment of the consequences of economic globalization on rural actors' livelihood strategies and the natural resources on which they depend (Toledo, 2000; Carabias & Provencio, 1993). This assessment includes improving the abilities of governmental institutions to offer pertinent solutions. The latter has given credence to the idea that overcoming poverty, increasing production, developing appropriate technology, and gaining the participation of farmers require profound social and institutional adjustments. More specifically, these ideas require a development model that is able to both respond to the specific necessities of the rural sector and develop strategies that strengthen governmental intervention in favor of sustainability (Muñoz & Guevara 1997).

Within the context of economic globalization, an increasing number of social actors can be identified looking for ways of constructing and developing alternative strategies to mitigate the negative effects (Toledo 2000) These actors have developed a number of responses and strategies, which can be conceptualized as efforts to construct viable and sustainable alternatives and a different social order in the local territory (Cortez et al., 1994; Morales, 2004; Waters, 1995).

This article describes a case study of these sustainable development alternatives, being a group of indigenous women farmers' experiences with rural tourism in western Mexico. This group, called "*Color de Tierra*" (Color of the Earth), has been working on ecological agriculture since 1995. Consequently, they have begun to develop activities that regulate the increasing number of tourists visiting their community (i.e., through rural tourism). The experiences of the group can be located in those endogenous rural development alternatives, which aim at strengthening the multi-functionality of the Mexican countryside. This is also an example of the generation of new alternatives that allow strengthening sustainable rural life conditions threatened by the forces of globalization.

This article presents different aspects of this women's group, starting by describing some theoretical and methodological notions as a primary step for understanding the experience of the group *Color de la Tierra*.

## **2.0 Multifunctionality and Endogenous Rural Development**

As mentioned previously, the contemporary problems of the rural areas of Mexico have given rise to discussions regarding solutions, including the design and implementation of new intervention schemes (Morales, 2004). As part of these discussions, the issue of multifunctionality has arisen, including the importance of consolidating it as a development strategy. Multifunctionality has been conceptualized as a pathway for achieving sustainable rural development in Europe, where its origins can be found (Atance et al., 2001). Examples of multifunctionality in Latin American countries also exist, although multifunctionality in those countries is seen more as a set of conceptual guidelines for revaluing traditional agriculture rather than as a rural development policy (Bonnal et al., 2003).

Although different definitions exist for the functional limits of agriculture, especially within diversified agri-food systems (Rodriguez, 2001), multifunctionality is considered to relate to the varied results that agriculture can generate depending on the farming systems and their specific characteristics (Reig, 2001). In other words, multifunctionality can be understood as the whole gamut of economic, ecological, productive and social functions in agriculture, which, in turn, can result in the generation of multiple products and services in rural areas (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Possible Functions of Agri-food Systems (Huylbroeck and Durand, 2003)*

<b>Economic</b>	<b>Environmental</b>	<b>Social</b>
Auto-sufficiency	Conservation of soil fertility	Strengthening of local knowledge
Fair trade	Diversification	Occupation of territory
Employment of family labor	Preservation of local varieties	Food security
Technological innovation	Natural equilibrium	Social organization
Income diversification	Water conservation	Knowledge transfer
	Landscape maintenance	Commitment to the Earth
	Generation of biological control	Cultural identity

A survey of Europe's experiences with strengthening multifunctional agriculture reveals important lessons for other regions of the world. This survey permits the observation of a major agrarian dynamism, which is fundamental for the maintenance and sustainable regional development of the rural community. In addition, this survey allows for the improvement of rural conditions, including agrodiversity management (Reig, 2001).

In economic terms, the focus on multifunctionality is representative of a new paradigm for public intervention that is based on the idea of correcting market flaws in the provision of public goods (Atance et al., 2001). At a political level, recognition of the multi-functional character of agriculture demands consideration of the new functions of agricultural activities and the countryside, along with classical political or economic objectives, such as competitive production and reasonable income for producers (Kallas & Gómez, 2002). The foregoing indicate that the multi-functional nature of agriculture can play an important role in achieving sustainability through the generation of ecological, economically and socially sound processes of rural development, which consequently directs attention to the analysis of its advantages in the local agri-food system (Rodriguez, 2001).

### **3.0 Multifunctionality and Rural Tourism**

Rural tourism, which is of particular interest in this article, is a new activity that has been incorporated into the many activities of peasants and farmers (as well as other actors) in rural areas (Ploeg et al., 2002). Tourism references all of the activities that people engage in during trips and stays in places other than their normal dwelling places, with the overall objectives of recreation and relaxation (OMT, 1993). From this perspective, tourism, a dynamizing activity for local, national and international economies, can be understood as an economic, social and cultural phenomenon. As mentioned previously, tourism is based on the movement of people from their normal dwelling places to new ones to change their existing routines for the purposes of resting, relaxing, and personal development (Virgen et al., 2008).

Rural tourism involves such activities, specifically in rural areas; in this case, tourism represents a complementary income source for peasants and farmers who have depended mainly on their primary activities (Blanco, 2008). Within rural tourism, different types of activities can be distinguished, such as

ecotourism, gastronomic workshops, preparation and use of traditional medicine, language and dialectical learning, artisanal workshops, rural photography, agrotourism and environmental interpretation (SECTUR, 2004).

### **3.1 Agrotourism, Environmental Interpretation and the Issue of Sustainability**

Agrotourism and environmental interpretation are at the heart of the rural tourism project discussed in this article. With the term agrotourism, reference is made here to the tourist activities related to the management of the rural natural environment that is inhabited by a peasant or farmer society that not only shares knowledge and understanding, but also a specific natural environment. The latter includes environmental and socio-productive manifestations, whereas tourism represents a complementary income-generating activity, next to agriculture (SECTUR, 2004).

The benefits of rural communities can also be obtained through environmental interpretation. This is an activity in which the visitor walks or drives along a specific route with informative boards and signs, often accompanied by environmental interpretation guides, to obtain knowledge about the natural and cultural environment (SECTUR, 2004).

Rural tourism permits the revalorization of local natural and cultural resources; it has, in turn, a local social basis for its implementation. In addition, rural tourism should be grounded in the sustainability principle of not degrading the resource base (Gerritsen, 2010). This last reason is why the term *sustainable rural tourism* is being used in this article; we refer to the development of rural touristic activities that have minimum impacts on the local cultural, ecological, economic and social environments (Gutiérrez & Gerritsen, 2011).

## **4.0 Research/Project Design**

The rural tourism experiences described in this article are the outcomes of an action-research project initiated in 1995 with a group of indigenous women farmers; the women farmers are members of an organization called “*Color de la Tierra*” (Color of the Earth).

From 1995 to 2006, priority in the project was given to the development of small-scale productive activities (e.g., creating ceramics and embroidery, producing marmalade from forest fruits, and growing organic coffee) (Villalvazo et al., 2012). The rural tourism component first emerged in 2006 due to an increase in foreign tourism to the nearby Pacific Coast, which then spread to the community (Gutiérrez & Gerritsen, 2011).

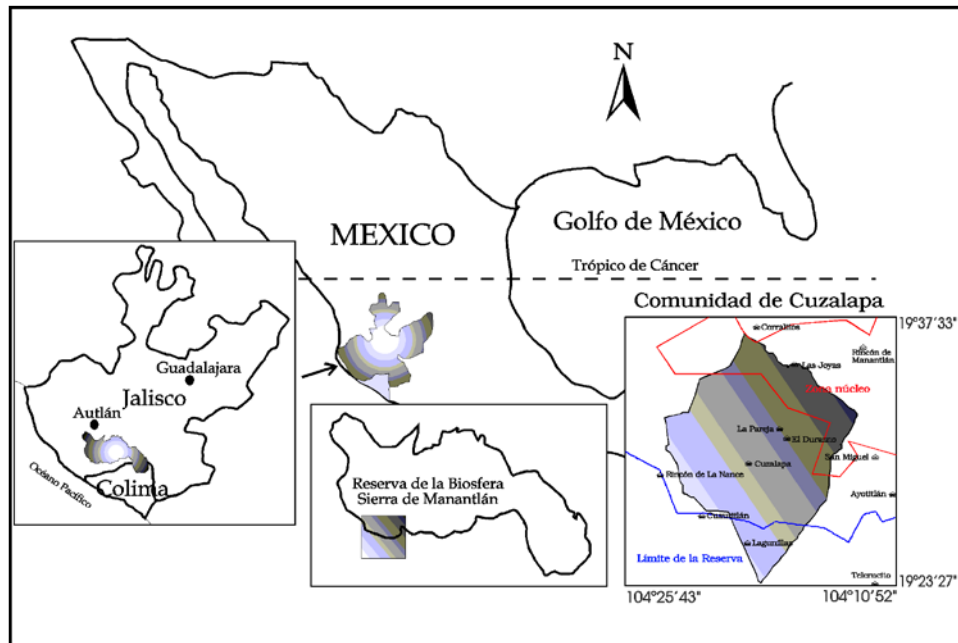
With respect to the rural tourism component, which constitutes the central case study in this article, the activities began with the implementation of a feasibility study, which took place in the form of a Bachelor’s thesis (Gutiérrez, 2006). After completing the thesis, a proposal was elaborated upon, presented, and discussed with the members of the Color of the Earth project. Once approved by the women, financial support was sought (and obtained), and the project started in early 2007, initiating a specific participatory planning process for this component of the overall work of the group (Gutiérrez & Gerritsen, 2011; Gerritsen, 2010).

The participatory planning process consisted of both training and follow-up workshops, which were organized to train the participants in specific themes and to discuss and decide upon ongoing activities (Gutiérrez & Gerritsen, 2011).

#### 4.1 Intervention Area

The project described in this article has been developed in the indigenous community of Cuzalapa (referred to here as “Cuzalapa”), which is located in the Sierra de Manantlán biosphere reserve in the southern coastal zone of Jalisco state in western México (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Location of Cuzalapa.



Source: Gerritsen, 2002.

The Sierra de Manantlán is a mountain range in western Mexico; a area of approximately 140,000 hectares was declared a biosphere reserve in 1987. The reserve contains a high degree of biological diversity; three core zones are present. Approximately 30% of the area is strictly protected, while 70% is a buffer zone where new rules govern land use. The reserve’s tenure regulations are imposed on existing properties; the attendant tenure institutions include 32 agrarian communities with 60% of the land and 80 private owners with 40% of the area. Conservation in the biosphere reserve has expanded from single-species protection to an integrated conservation and development project. Realizing this dual mission has challenged the reserve managers (Gerritsen, 2002).

Cuzalapa is located on the southern slopes of the Sierra, encompassing 23,963 hectares; 71% of the community’s land is included in the buffer zone, while 19% is located within the three core zones. The rest of the land lies outside the reserve. The community consists of 1,500 people in a main village, along with several hamlets. Maize cultivation previously dominated the local economy, but cattle breeding has become increasingly important since the 1970s. Trees and forests are important for domestic purposes and supporting farming practice; commercial exploitation does not take place (Gerritsen, 2002).

#### 4.2 Brief History of the Sustainable Rural Tourism Project

As stated before, the sustainable rural tourism project includes a group of 13 indigenous women farmers united in the organization “*Color de la Tierra*”. These women have developed agroindustrial activities since 1995. The staff of the University of Guadalajara, as well as some other institutions, have assisted

the women in their training and organizational activities since the formation of the group (Villalvazo et al., 2003; Gerritsen 2010).

The basic premise of the overall project is to promote and commercialize agroecological products that are produced by the members of Color de la Tierra, such as organic coffee, marmalade made from selected fruits, *pipián* (a local sauce), bread, tortillas and tostadas. These commercial activities permit direct interaction between the women and visiting tourists, providing an additional income source to the community (see Gerritsen, 2010).

Since the incorporation of the rural tourism component in 2006, the project has also included an environmental interpretation route, which was initiated in February of 2007. Originally, two routes were designed and implemented, and both were related to the organic coffee plantations in the community. However, one of the two routes was lost when the municipality changed the course of a river. In addition, a waste disposal site was established at the river bank next to the original route.

An agrotouristic route is currently being designed, from which local crops and cattle can be observed. In other words, tourists can observe and participate in the typical farming practices of the Cuzalapa. While the environmental interpretation route is in use for only a few months per year, the agrotouristic route will permit tourist entertainment throughout the year. However, the implementation of this route has become insecure, since hurricane Jova hit the region in September of 2010, and damaged great part of the landscape.

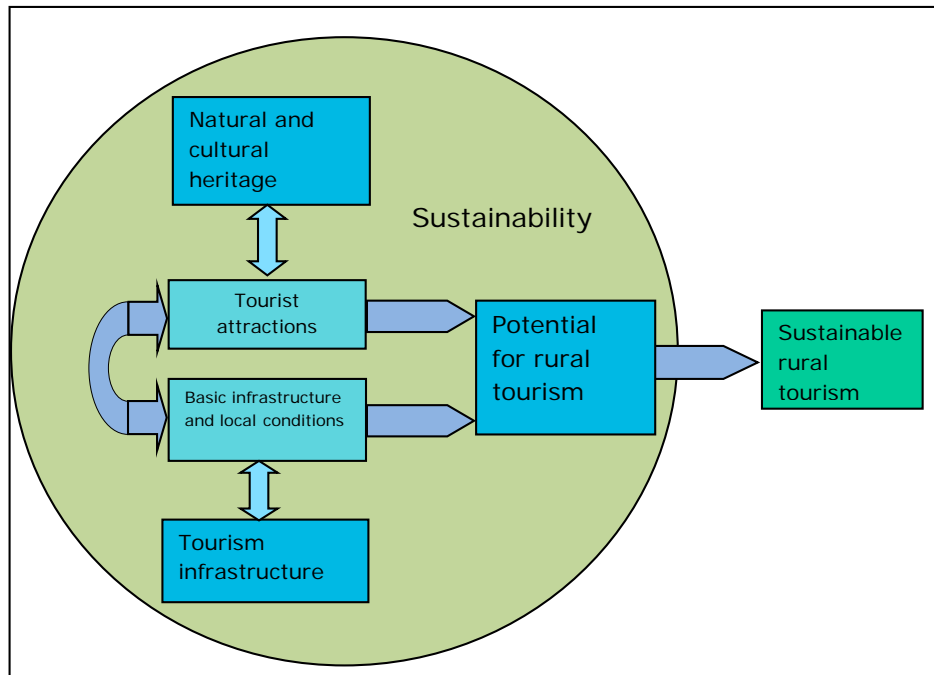
Such tourist activities have been developed as a response to the need of the women's group to regulate the increasing touristic activity that had already been observed in the community prior to 2006 and was starting to become more frequent and intense. These tourists included, among others, a significant number of U.S. and Canadian citizens. Although the major destinations of the tourists are the Jalisco state beaches, many visit the Sierra de Manantlán and the local communities during a one-day trip. In other words, tourists arrive in the morning and leave in the afternoon to return to their hotels in the coastal urban areas, which is due to the proximity (a 2 hour drive) of Cuzalapa to the coastal zone.

Since the early 2000's, the group has had its own building, in which they manufacture their own products, mainly organic coffee, and hold meetings. This building is also a place where visitors are received. Recently, in 2011, a new section of the building was constructed, permitting the space to be divided into a production area, a restaurant/visitor's area and a small shop.

### ***4.3 An Overview of the Touristic Potential of Cuzalapa***

The overall approach to the development of rural tourism activities in this project began with an inventory of the touristic potential of Cuzalapa. This inventory was completed in 2006 by a student in the Bachelor's program in tourism at the South Coast University Center of the University of Guadalajara (Gutiérrez, 2006). The aim of this inventory was not only to describe the different touristic attractions (including natural and cultural heritage) but also the social, economic and institutional settings in which rural tourism, a new activity, could be embedded. This included a description of the basic infrastructure (such as electricity and water sewage, among other things) and the local social conditions that influence the tourism infrastructure. Figure 2 schematically presents the components of the different conceptual parts of the project.

Figure 2: General Framework for Sustainable Rural Tourism.



Source: Gutierrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

Following Cárdenas (1996), we distinguish the different types of tourist activities related to natural and cultural heritage as follows: folklore (local beliefs and traditions that illustrate rural life), agricultural activities, interesting natural sites, cultural manifestations (showing the historical identity of the local people), and pagan manifestations (indigenous or polytheistic local celebrations or other feasts). According to our inventory, an important number of such activities are found in Cuzalapa (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Overview of Tourist Attractions in Cuzalapa*

Type	#	%
Folklore	27	40%
Agricultural activities	14	21%
Natural sites	11	16%
Cultural manifestations	13	19%
Pagan manifestations	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Gutierrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

Cuzalapa is considered to be among the most marginalized communities in the state. Therefore, the basic infrastructure is not very developed and living conditions are relatively harsh. These local conditions help to explain the presence of a limited tourism infrastructure, at least in the short term (i.e., until physical improvements are made) (Gutiérrez & Gerritsen, 2011). Moreover, as Cuzalapa is located within a biosphere reserve, restrictions on natural resource management exist because the reserve imposes rules and regulations beyond the customary ones (Gerritsen, 2002). Together, these factors shape the potential for designing and implementing sustainable rural tourism activities.



## 5. Implementing the Project

After completing the tourism potential inventory and taking into account the local (social and institutional) conditions of Cuzalapa, the results of the study were discussed with different actors and groups in the community. The logic behind this discussion was to implement a tourist program that could benefit the whole community. However, due to internal conflicts in the community (Gerritsen & Forster, 2001), a community-level approach was not feasible. Because of this major challenge, and because the only positive response was obtained from the Color of the Earth group, a more limited approach was selected. However, elaboration upon this project is still visualized for the future.

Following the positive response from the women's group, a participatory planning process was initiated in 2007 with the Color of the Earth group. The design of the sustainable rural tourism activities was based on the following three objectives: (1) regulating the increasing presence of foreign tourists, (2) revaluing local traditions and knowledge, and (3) creating a new income source. The starting point for the project was a jointly agreed-upon proposal based on four main categories of activities:

1. Realization of a socio-environmental impact analysis;
2. Implementation of (tourist) activities and construction of the necessary infrastructure;
3. Training of the participants (i.e., members of the Color of the Earth); and
4. Implementation of a commercialization strategy (Gutierrez & Gerritsen, 2011).

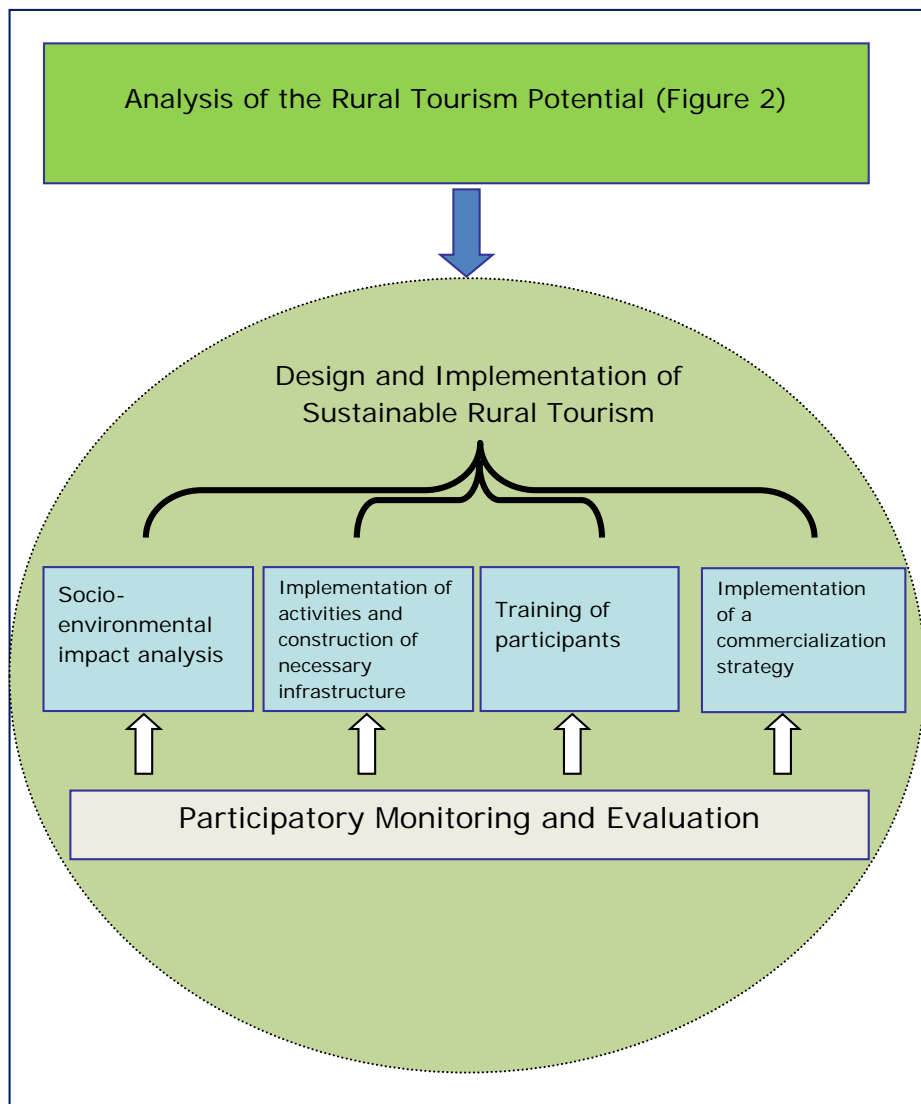
Figure 3 schematically presents the main conceptual elements of the project.

Between 2007 and 2012, visiting the coffee gardens has been the most important tourist activity, particularly during the harvest, which occurs between November and April. To reach the coffee gardens, individual plots have to be trespassed. Therefore, the women asked individual landowners to grant permission for visitors to cross their agricultural fields to reach the coffee gardens. In some cases, this generated some (minor) problems; therefore, the women are now establishing coffee gardens and shade trees on land owned by their husbands or themselves. In this sense, the women can avoid conflicts caused by trespassing on the fields of other community members and they are no longer dependent upon the goodwill of others.

To obtain a more precise idea of the visits, as well as for planning purposes, the frequency of visits to the project were recorded. Figure 4 presents the monthly frequency of visitors from 2007 to 2009. The data show that most visitors arrive in Cuzalapa during the winter (from November to March) and, to a lesser degree, in the spring and early summer (from May to July). Both periods coincide with national (i.e., Mexican) holidays. The winter period has proven to be especially interesting due to the flowering of the coffee gardens.

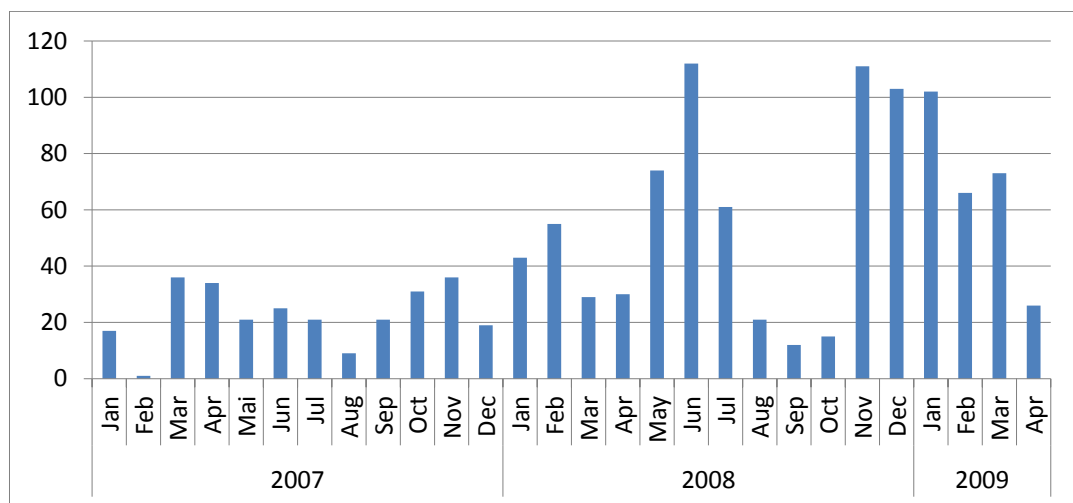
Most people who visit Cuzalapa are from the municipality, but increasing numbers of Canadian and US citizens have also been visiting Cuzalapa. As stated previously, the latter usually stay at the various beach resorts in Jalisco state. Because one of the sales venues for the goods produced is located in the coastal region, the consumers of these products have become aware of Cuzalapa and Color de la Tierra, and they have subsequently visited the community. Figure 5 presents an overview of the tourists who visited Cuzalapa from 2007 to 2009.

Figure 3: Elements of the Sustainable Rural Tourism Project.



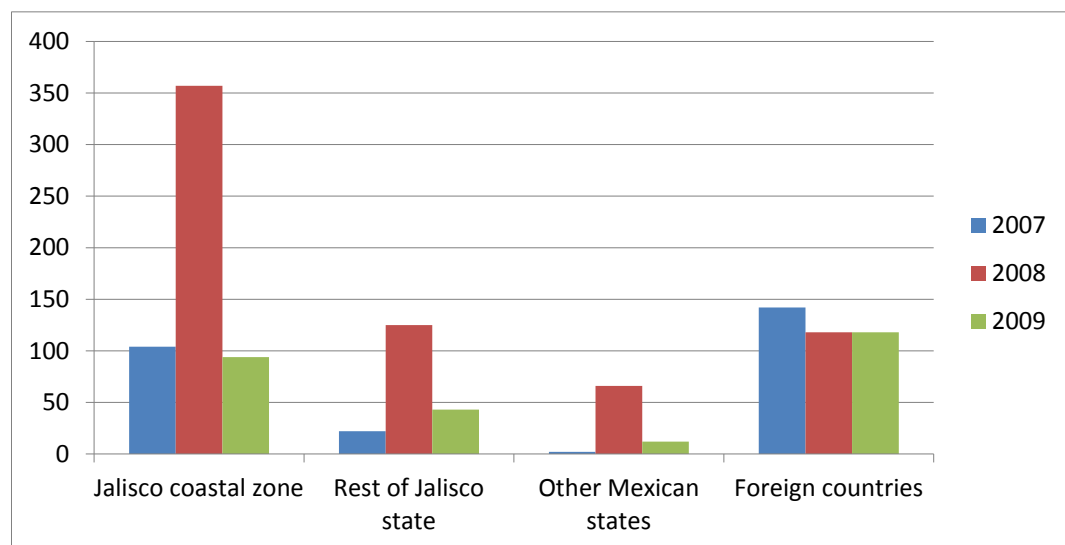
Source: Gutiérrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

Figure 4: Frequency of Visits to the Sustainable Rural Tourism Project between 2007 and 2009.



Source: adapted from Gutiérrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

Figure 6: Origins of Visitors in the Period 2007 – 2009.



Source: Gutiérrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

As part of monitoring the activities of visiting tourists, a short questionnaire was administered to gather visitors’ opinions of the project. Table 3 presents some results of this questionnaire.

Table 3. *Opinions of Visitors Regarding the Sustainable Rural Tourism Project*

Aspects	General Comments	Comments regarding improvements
	“The visit is interesting.”	
Environmental interpretation route	“The route is beautiful and fun to walk.” “The guides have sufficient information.”	“Informative signs are missing.”
	“Good attention and services”	“Additional group dynamics are missing.”
Activities in the visitor’s center	“Good organization.” “A good example of community development and conservation.”	“Use paper and not plastic bags.”
	“Good coffee!” “Good organic products.”	No comments
Food and products	“Very good menu.” “Good mojote bread.” “An example of recuperation traditional gastronomy.”	

Source: Gutiérrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

As part of the project, training workshops were also organized around a diverse array of themes, such as environmental interpretation, bird watching, attention to visitors, local gastronomy, and accountability (see Table 3). During the

implementation of the project, follow-up meetings were organized to monitor advances and perspectives, as well as for collective decision-making.

Table 3. *Overview of the Themes Addressed in the Various Training Workshops*

Workshop	Themes
Bird observation	Theory and practice
Tourist culture	Theory and practice Evaluation of offered services
Gastronomy	Importance and revalorization of local gastronomic traditions
Cultural heritage	Revalorization of myths and legends
Accountability	Cost-benefit analysis
Environmental education	Waste separation Importance of biodiversity

Source: Gutiérrez and Gerritsen, 2011.

Finally, diffusion materials were prepared, including informative leaflets and a poster, where the products of the group are described. Figure 6 presents the logo that was designed for the group.

Figure 6: Logo of the Group Color de la Tierra.



Source: Gutierrez & Gerritsen, 2011

## 6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, different elements of a participatory action-research project on rural sustainable tourism in the south coastal region of Jalisco state in western Mexico were briefly presented and discussed. Keeping the local natural and cultural environments relatively undisturbed has been one of the important aspects of the tourism component of the project; in this article, we referred to this type of rural tourism as sustainable rural tourism. This study was performed to regulate the environmental and social impacts of the visitors while working with an indigenous community located within a natural protected area. This study was also performed because the community members belong to an ethnic group (Gerritsen & Díaz, 2012).

The results of the project indicate that sustainable rural tourism and the initiative of local groups, such as the Color of the Earth group, can offer new perspectives for the design and implementation of intervention schemes for promoting and strengthening sustainable development through rural tourism (Gerritsen, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 2008).

The results also indicate that rural populations have the capacity to generate their own development models without negatively impacting their natural and cultural environments. In addition, rural populations are capable of generating alternative economic benefits that are complementary to traditional agricultural activities. In other words, the experiences of the project indicate that it is possible to develop new activities related to the endogenous potential that is available in a rural community. The reconfiguration of this potential has a positive impact on the development of rural communities (Gerritsen & Morales, 2007; Ploeg, 1994). Note that several authors (Toledo, 2000; Gerritsen & Morales, 2007) have argued that a development strategy based on endogenous potential has a greater possibility of success than one based on exogenous potential, which involves greater dependence on external factors and actors.

Currently, the project in Cuzalapa is confronted by three challenges. First, elaborating upon the project has been very difficult. The impact of the project has been considerably localized; only the members of the group Color de la Tierra benefit. A study involving other farmers' organizations in the region is presently being conducted to explore the potential of rural tourism in other regions. In addition, since 1999, efforts have been made to construct a state-level farmers' network to articulate similar experiences and elaborate upon experiences like the one in Cuzalapa (cfr. Gerritsen & Morales, 2009). The latter has been very successful in the sense that a state-level platform has been created for interchanging alternative development experiences without losing the creativity that exists within each one of the different local groups (Gerritsen, 2010).

Second, the project has been confronted with some unexpected factors and actors, especially when the group's work began to become successful. In this sense, tourism, a new activity, has been a source of some controversy, particularly among the husbands of the group members and among other community members. Regarding the former group, redefinition of gender roles has taken place, permitting more room to maneuver for the women. Interestingly, redefining gender roles has been an achievement for the women, although the project never explicitly addressed the issue of gender. With reference to the wider community, as discussed above, trespassing on private fields has sometimes been a problem, although this has now been solved by constructing and rehabilitating coffee gardens on land owned by the women or their relatives.

Finally, as the project is based upon a participatory planning approach, its implementation has been relatively slow, which has been especially difficult for funding agencies because they expect concrete results within a specific time frame.

In general terms, although these challenges exist, the result of the project has been satisfactory in the sense that the Color of the Earth group has consolidated sustainable rural tourism activities as part of their overall project. They have performed so in such a way that a localized development strategy has been constructed. In other words, the endogenous rural development potential was reconfigured, increasing its multifunctionality. In turn, it has become possible to revalorize and strengthen the cultural and natural countryside of Mexico, particularly in the indigenous community of Cuzalapa.

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