

Indigenous Ecotourism in Preserving and Empowering Mayan Natural and Cultural Values at Palenque, Mexico

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Abstract—Indigenous ecotourism in the Mayan Area has gone virtually unmentioned in the literature. As a result of the course of tourism in the Mayan Area, this study assessed the level of empowerment in the Mayan communities surrounding a major archaeological site and tourism attraction of the Classic Maya: Palenque, in Mexico. The empowerment framework was used to assess whether or not tourism develops in terms that ultimately benefit the local communities economically, psychologically, politically, socially, and environmentally. A checklist of empowerment indicators identified from the literature were tested and contrasted with the interviews conducted with Mayan tourism stakeholders. Results indicate that local indigenous participation in tourism has not easily occurred due to a lack of knowledge of tourism and limited economic resources and negotiation skills, which has significantly disempowered Mayan communities. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) have not participated in local tourism development until recently and investment from the private tourism sector has not stood out with its presence. The Mexican government is tracing the course of indigenous ecotourism with several support programs. These results form the basis for more effective strategies to maximize involvement of Mayan communities in managing their cultural and natural resources and the tourism on which they depend.

Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, tourism has become one of the world's fastest growing industries and can be an important constituent of a country's economy. Currently, tourism provides 7.6% of global employment and 9.4% of the world's Gross National Product (WTTC 2009). In 2006, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) reported that US\$ 6.5 trillion was generated by all components of

tourism throughout the world, and forecasted an average of 4.2% annual increase for the next decade.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines indigenous communities, people, and nations as those having "a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, are distinct from other settler groups and want to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity" (UNDP 2004). This historical continuity is based on occupation of ancestral lands, common ancestry, cultural practices, and language. Indigenous people are also economically and culturally marginalized and often live in extreme poverty. They mainly have a subsistence economy and rely on natural resources for food and cash. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) stated that indigenous people comprise 5% of the world's population but embody 80% of the world's cultural diversity. They are estimated to occupy 20% of the world's land surface but nurture 80% of the world's biodiversity on ancestral lands and territories (UNCSD 2002). In Latin America, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated the indigenous population at between 20 to 40 million in the last decade (WFP 1998). The exact number is unknown due to a lack of agreement on a definition and the steady impacts of globalization. For indigenous people, achieving sustainable ecotourism depends on asserting legal rights, indigenous control of land and resources, geographic location, funding or business support, and developing effective links with the wider tourism industry (Zeppel 2006).

Mexico is the seventh preferred country in the world for international tourists (WTO, 2006) and a mass tourism industry is based around beach resorts on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. In fact, tourism is the third most important economic activity in the country. However, due to the global economic crisis in 2008 and the global influenza the year after, revenues from tourism industry dropped 15% in the country in 2009, adding up to US\$ 11.3 billion (SECTUR 2010).

The Mexican population's majority is *mestizo*, which is a combination of pre-Hispanic cultures and Spanish colonialists. However, more than 60 *etnias* (indigenous cultures) are spread throughout Mexico, and represent more than 10% of the country's population, and the biggest indigenous population for Latin American countries. Indigenous cultures in Mexico normally live in community-owned lands that they use in different ways for their livelihoods. This system of communal lands is known as *ejido* and is the most basic unit of village government in Mexico.

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Mexico has amazing biodiversity and is a center of biological endemism with large numbers of unique animal and plant species. It has about 10% of all amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, and plant species of the world. This positions Mexico as the world's fourth most biodiverse country (CONABIO 2009). The tropics in Mexico are located in the southeastern part of the country whereas subtropical, temperate, arid, and semiarid climates with different natural resources are located in central and northern Mexico. The *Selva Maya* constitutes one of the largest remaining zones of tropical forest in North and Central America and covers an area including the countries of Mexico (the Yucatan peninsula and the Lacandon forest in Chiapas), Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Palenque

Palenque is a Mayan town of 37,301 inhabitants (INEGI 2005) and a major archaeological site in the Mexican State of Chiapas. It contains some of the finest architecture, sculpture, and relief carvings that the Maya produced. Its major archaeological remains date back to 400 A.D. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) controls research excavations and tourism activities on the archaeological heritage. In Palenque, INAH manages 330 ha in which archaeological mapping and exploration indicate that the city ruins seem to occupy about 150 ha, but the majority of the structures are covered by rain forest vegetation (Barnhart 1998).

As a result of its cultural value, the government declared the site as a cultural monument for humanity, resulting in the creation of Palenque National Park in 1981 and in the definitive preservation of its cultural and natural resources. The National Commission for Protected Natural Areas (CONANP) manages the natural resources of the park and develops programs with participation of two local indigenous communities located within the park's zone of incidence. The park encompasses 1,771 ha of which about 600 ha consist of primary rainforest vegetation. An additional 300 ha consists of second growth vegetation in different stages of regeneration. The rest consists of introduced pasturelands. Data from an earlier survey of the vegetation showed the existence of about 241 species of trees (Diaz Gallegos 1996). The terrain at the site is rugged, and elevation ranges from 150 to 500 m above sea level. The climate is tropical and it rains almost all year round. The average annual precipitation fluctuates around 2,200 mm, and the mean annual temperature fluctuates around 26 °C.

At the north, the park is surrounded by flat pasture lands owned by cattle ranchers while at the south the mountain range of North Chiapas starts to elevate. The Mayan communities of El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos adjoin the Park in the elevated southern part. El Naranjo is a *Maya tzeltal* spoken community whereas Lopez Mateos is a *Maya chol* spoken community. They are located 5 km up into the mountains from the Palenque archaeological site and some family members from both communities go to the park every day to offer guided tour services or sell handcrafts in the park to the visitors.

Like Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, and Los Cabos in the past, in 2008 Palenque was targeted by the Mexican government

to be the newest *Integral Planned Centre* in Mexico in order to boost the tourism activity and to attract three times the number of tourists and investments that come to the site today. This centre is planned to reinforce the connectivity of Palenque through the internationalization of the current local airport and the construction of a modern highway from Palenque to other tourism destinations within the State of Chiapas. According to the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) through its Tourism Foment National Fund agency (FONATUR), Palenque is the third most visited archaeological site in the country and attracts about 650,000 visitors each year. An investment of US\$120 million in the State is estimated for this project, which "will generate more and better jobs for the local families" (FONATUR 2008).

Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to evaluate and compare sustainable tourism development and empowerment through tourism in Mayan indigenous communities around the archaeological site of Palenque in Mexico. A Mayan village was selected based on its proximity with this major Mayan tourism destination for archaeology, culture, and nature. The study relies on the indigenous ecotourism empowerment framework developed by Scheyvens (2002) because it is presented as a way of determining whether or not communities are engaging in tourism in ways that ultimately benefit them; this includes economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment. A fifth aspect of environmental empowerment was also tested in this study. Data collection and fieldwork research started in May 2009 and finished in November 2009.

Participant observation at Palenque was focused on tourist flows, community involvement with tourism, livelihood activities, and environmental conservation. Key stakeholders from the ministries involved with sustainable tourism development programs at a national level were interviewed in Mexico City. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders in Palenque. Overall, six semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in Mexico City with directors of tourism departments, and five were conducted in Palenque including government authorities, one tour operator manager, one ecotourism NGO consultant, and the community sheriff from the Mayan community of El Naranjo. Additionally, two focus groups made up of 5 to 10 community members, including local tour guides and handcrafters, were held. Data were analyzed to determine stakeholders' views on community empowerment and tourism participation.

A checklist of economic, psychological, social, political, and environmental indicators on sustainable tourism development and community empowerment identified in the literature were completed for the community. Information collected from interviews and focus groups was subject to content analysis of themes on community empowerment and tourism participation. The checklist of empowerment indicators in El Naranjo was assessed quantitatively through a 5-point Likert scale (from very empowering = 5 to very disempowering = 1; fig. 1).

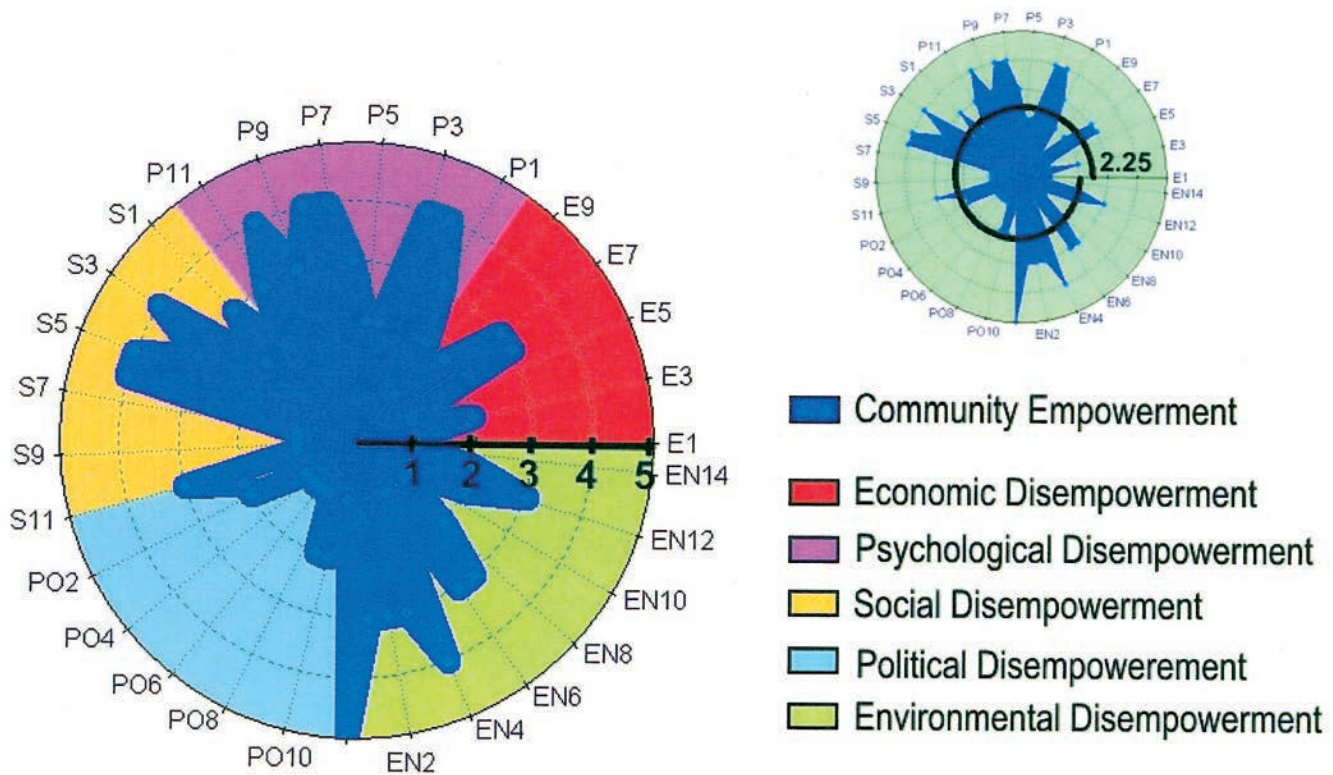


Figure 1—Levels of indigenous ecotourism empowerment in El Naranjo.

Results

El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos are two neighboring indigenous Mayan communities located 5 km apart, uphill from the pyramids of Palenque at an altitude of 232 m above sea level. El Naranjo's population census accounted for 411 inhabitants (INEGI 2005). On average, families are made up of 6 members (range 4 to 12). The surface of the *ejido* extends for 1,500 ha. On average, each of the 72 *ejidatarios* or assembly members has 20 ha for his own use. El Naranjo village settled in the area in 1945 whereas Lopez Mateos settled in the early 1960s. Both have used their land for self-sustaining through agriculture, house farming, cattle grazing, and hunting. Over the past 20 years, many Mayans from the two villages have been converting their livelihoods toward tourism, and this activity has become the main and, almost only, money income generator for community households.

In the past, a few visitors used to arrive in El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos to experience contact with wild nature and indigenous Mayan communities. A path along a river course underneath the canopy of the rainforest in Palenque connected the archaeological Park with these two Mayan communities that inhabit the other side of the mountain. Without tourism services in El Naranjo in the early 1990s, members from both communities started to arrive at the park to offer handicrafts to the visitors, but were initially repelled by the guards from the archaeological Park.

The involvement in tourism became a need for families to improve their household economies within the community and boomed in 1994 along with the Zapatista movement.

The power of the Zapatista movement originated in Chiapas in the mid 1990s and spread into most of the Mayan indigenous communities in the State of Chiapas, including El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos. These communities took advantage of the situation to finally get a space for trade handicrafts inside the pyramids after 1994. However, this activity is neither promoted nor allowed by INAH inside archaeological sites of Mexico. Although members from both communities negotiated an agreement with authorities from INAH Palenque, this is still considered an informal activity today. This is how both communities started to get involved with tourism.

Today, the majority of people from El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos work in tourism-related activities at least part-time, either in their community producing crafts, or within the National Park in informal tourism activities such as handicraft sales and tour guiding inside the archaeological site. A small group of members from El Naranjo have become certified tour guides and offer tour guiding services at the pyramids in a formal way. A few others from both communities are hired by the park for guarding, ticket sales, maintenance, and support in the archaeological excavations or have permission to sell food and drinks to tourists outside the archaeological site.

The main results from the data collected through interviews and focus groups are presented in tables 1 and 2. A compilation of the opinions of eight government authorities interviewed is presented in the first column. These included two key government authorities in Palenque (SECTUR and CONANP) and six at a National Level, which involved ministries related to the economic, environmental, social, and tourism sectors that have programs for the development of indigenous ecotourism in their agendas. Advisers from an NGO (*Razonatura*) and from a tour operator company in Palenque are summarized in the second column. Opinions from the sheriff of the community in El Naranjo, and from two focus groups are synthesized in the third column.

Overall, 60 different indicators of economic (E), psychological (P), social (S), political (PO), and environmental (EN) empowerment were identified for the community of El Naranjo. Figure 1 shows the level of empowerment based on these indicators. Of the five aspects assessed in the chart, the highest scored was the psychological aspect with a mean of 3.2 points. This indicates neutral empowerment (neither empowered nor disempowered). The social and environmental aspect averaged 2.4 and 2.2 points respectively, meaning the community is somewhat socially and environmentally

disempowered by tourism. The economic and political aspects were the lowest scored, averaging 1.7 points in each case, indicating a disempowering situation resulting from tourism.

The upper-right smaller circle in figure 1 shows the linear fit of the chart, which resulted in a mean of 2.25 points and indicates that the overall effect of indigenous ecotourism is somewhat disempowering, based on the 5-point Likert scale used.

Discussion and Conclusions

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have researched a large number of aspects of the Maya, including their traditional and contemporary environmental management practices (Toledo and others 2001). Interest in these practices arises from the fact that Mayas inhabit a fragile ecological zone and base their natural resources management strategies on centuries of accumulated experience (Faust 2001). By the same token, Mayan indigenous communities have collective land grants and control of more than 50% of forests in the *Area Maya*, which has politically empowered them in the way they manage the land they own, based on their uses and customs.

Table 1—Stakeholders' perspectives on Mayan indigenous ecotourism empowerment in Palenque, Mexico.

	Government Authorities	NGOs & Tour Advisers	Mayan Indigenous Leaders & Community Members
1	Few cases of indigenous communities that have benefited economically. Minimal benefits. However, "government intention is to benefit them." Funds for indigenous ecotourism development appear in more than 10 federal government departments.	Profits come from tour guidance and craft sales. Benefits are at a family level.	Almost the only economic revenues for the community come from tourism. There are more jobs in the crops paid for with money from tourism. There is more development in the community
2	Indigenous communities are interested in government subsidy for tourism, but not really optimistic for tourism. The real possibilities are short though. They are not trained for tourism and this is a disempowering condition.	Communities are more aware of tourism. They have better quality lifestyles than before	The community sheriff and most of the Assembly (elder leaders) are not keen about tourism involvement. Instead, youngsters and a few others are interested in tourism.
3	Tourism is not creating more problems than those existing without it, but might be causing social cohesion and organization willing to involve in tourism-related activities.	There are differences in opinion among community members from El Nanjo regarding tourism.	There are intra familiar problems since parents want their children to work on the crops rather than being involved in tourism. However it has activated a social cohesion process for those interested in it since they can't find tourism involvement opportunities in a different way.
4	Capacity-building is needed for communities to be involved in tourism. They normally have no knowledge of the tourism industry. They lack a development vision. The educational level has grown compared to a generation before, however.	They do not have administrative capacity for a major involvement in tourism.	Community is not organized at all. Young people involved in tour guiding and crafts sales are getting organized in order to aspire for more and better opportunities to be involved in tourism. Elders don't believe that their community has potential for indigenous ecotourism.
5	Communities need more environmental education and sustainable practices of tourism to develop a sense of awareness about the value of their natural landscapes	Some villagers still hunt at night; however, nowadays they are more aware of natural resources.	Community has a ban for hunting and logging. There are also clean policies for the community. "We persuade tourists to follow good practices of tourism in terms of environmental education while they visit the Park." The Assembly works together with government environmental projects.

1= Economic empowerment; 2 = Psychological empowerment; 3 = Social empowerment; 4 = Political empowerment; 5 = Environmental empowerment.

Table 2—Stakeholders' perspectives on Mayan indigenous ecotourism participation in Palenque, Mexico.

	Government Authorities	NGOs & Tour Advisers	Mayan Indigenous Leaders & Community Members
Government	• Development of the offer; • Effective application of instruments for environmental management of tourism; • Development and knowledge of abilities for a sustainable development of tourism; • Support of impact assessment consultancies; • Development of tools for environmental foment and regulations for the tourism sector; • Financial assistance is given to the elaboration and performance of projects; • Training and ecotourism products promotion are facilitated; • Promotion of traditional indigenous celebration such as dance, music and gastronomy for tourism has been attended; • There are economic and training facilities to develop indigenous ecotourism ventures in Palenque provided by CONANP.	INAH doesn't put order in the Archaeological site of Palenque, and allows illegal handcrafters and tour guides to offer their products and services, which is creating problems.	"FONATUR Integral Planned Tourism Centre in Palenque will affect the community." Government doesn't take the community into account. However, CONANP and local government are working on a couple of projects for development and conservation. INAH has caused clashes between community members and Park guards since they do not allow craft sales.
Tour Operators	• Minimal collaboration or no negotiation between local communities and private enterprises. • Tour operators are not interested in many sites as products to market. • They do not care about environmental or cultural impacts of tourism. • Travel agencies that market the services are the link with the offer. • Results have been positive when the tour operators associate with indigenous communities. • Tour operators are normally narrow-minded just looking for the short-termed economic benefit.	Hire local tour guides in the visited sites. Tourists buy crafts. However, tour operators go regularly with the cheapest deal.	They are not participating directly in the communities, and they are not taking the community into account for ecotourism. Elders in the community do not like tourism.
NGOs	• NGOs are hired by communities for technical assistance and take part in the process. • "They need to act coordinated amongst them as government does with other departments." • They have originated confusion with their different ideas in some communities; however, they help to mitigate impacts of tourism. • Many times they participate as the performers of national and international financial assistance for development. • The challenge for NGOs is the transfer of knowledge and awareness about community resources for tourism. • NGOs integrate stakeholders and charge for that; some are oriented toward ecotourism. • NGOs have been the pioneers trying to benefit communities from ecotourism.	They have provided infrastructure and training (capacity-building). There are no NGOs in Palenque working on that, however.	No NGOs have visited the community before for development projects such as ecotourism. El Naranjo looks forward to receiving assistance from Fund Aids and support from NGOs.

Many Latin American countries have policies for indigenous ecotourism that integrates nature and culture, but most village ecotourism projects rely on funding and support from conservation NGOs and other foreign aid (Dahles and Keune 2002). Governmental policies and funds for community-owned indigenous ecotourism ventures in Mexico have become more common in governmental ministries and local departments over the last decade. The participation of local and international NGOs has become necessary for the empowerment

of indigenous people to be involved with tourism. This has been achieved through the promotion of tourism committees within communities and transfer of knowledge and capacity-building in ecotourism. Mexican environmental NGOs have supported a few indigenous ecotourism projects in Mexico, such as *Pronatura* and *Amigos de Sian Kaan* that worked together with Mayan communities in the Yucatan (e.g., Punta Laguna, Punta Allen); however, they have been short-term and limited in effect (Zeppel 2006).

Very few private tourism companies have been involved in ecotourism in the past in Mexico. However, tourism towns such as Palenque and San Cristobal have been attracting migrants from rural areas to work in services in the hospitality sector. They have also attracted foreign business people, who have become residents after having been tourists, and who are now in the tourism industry. According to State authorities, tourism activity in Palenque increased 24% from 2006 to 2008, due to promotions by local, State, and Federal governments in Mexico. Coordination within government levels represents a challenge to the "transparency" promoted by the Federal government, because they often represent different government parties and, therefore, different plans and development strategies for tourism. The State governments have also given little rendering of accounts and arbitrarily pursue national economic resources, which has created an unfavorable panorama in the development of indigenous ecotourism. National government programs for indigenous ecotourism have acted together and in cooperation with ecotourism consultants and NGOs to reduce the gap in terms of local indigenous capacities to manage their natural and cultural resources. For indigenous ecotourism, government programs would ideally offer an economic alternative to logging, mining, hunting, and agriculture, provide funds for local schools and healthcare facilities, and strengthen indigenous cultures.

To avoid the promotion of paternalistic attitudes with indigenous communities nowadays, government funds invested in indigenous ecotourism are granted as a response to an action strategy drawing on the community. As seen by key Mexican government advisers, "ecotourism has not boomed in Mexico as it has done in other countries. The efforts must be focused on key communities to offer high quality services regarding the attractiveness and diversification of tourism products, and then be able to increase the visitor fees for conservation of natural and cultural areas." The FONATUR investment for the development of an *Integral Planned Center* in Palenque would allow a better tourism development plan to be set up in Palenque. This will depend on the extent of local participation and expertise consultation for the strategy of ecotourism development and environmental management within the national park.

The involvement of the private sector for infrastructure and promotion is also necessary. In fact, the marketing sector has not received attention and tour operators are not promoting local destinations, many times due to a lack of accessibility, services, and indigenous negotiation skills, which has disempowered local communities. As reported in the literature, problems such as growing competition, low visitation rates, and security issues have limited these indigenous tourism enterprises in the past decade. Other limiting factors include a lack of basic tourism infrastructure, little name recognition for remote areas, and continued dependency on funding, staff training, and marketing support from environmental NGOs and industry partners (Dahles and Keune 2002).

There are no tourism services in El Naranjo today to receive tourists. Elderly people in the community think that if they do not use their land for crops, house farming, or domestic livestock, the government will take control of it for protection. Ecotourism is seen as a threat for this group of *ejidatarios* in El Naranjo since they believe tourism would dispossess

them from land control or become someone else's business on their lands. As such, they are not keen to get involved with tourism. However, the amount of people from both communities participating in tourism services in Palenque is steadily growing to the point of involving, at least part-time, about one half of the population of El Naranjo and Lopez Mateos today. The differences in opinion about tourism in El Naranjo have not indicated an empowering or disempowering condition of the psychological aspect.

In Palenque, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) has been in charge of the management of the archaeological site for more than 50 years, but it has done little for better tourism planning in and around the archaeological site where more than half a million people visit each year. Conversely, although CONANP was not created until 2000, and administration of the natural park of Palenque started in 2004, their programs have involved participation of the communities of Lopez Mateos and El Naranjo. This might mean that the INAH's attributions as a government agency for the conservation of historic and archaeological heritage have been taken over by other government agencies, and that there is an administrative gap in terms of tourism management that is not yet regulated inside the areas preserved by INAH.

The involvement of communities in tourism has become difficult since it requires time and internal organization. Villagers look for their daily benefit, which is based on the retail sales of crafts and other services such as tour guiding in the archaeological park. Although there is a disempowering condition caused by the limited economic revenue from tourism in El Naranjo, youngsters are improving their educational level and tourism skills for better involvement with ecotourism. It is worthwhile to conclude that the conservation of natural areas and preservation of indigenous cultural values associated with local profits from visitation activities is the essence of indigenous ecotourism. Indigenous ecotourism depends on community empowerment that is achieved once villagers are aware of the essence of ecotourism and have built capacities and negotiation skills to participate in it.

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