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< Box X> Conservation and Sustainable Tourism in the lower Rio Negro Basin, Amazonas Brazil.

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<1> Introduction

Challenges for sustainable tourism in the lower Rio Negro Amazon Basin are daunting in spite of favorable environmental and social conditions. An initiative to improve the quality of what is being offered and to turn tourism into a more sustainable activity by favoring nature and people in the Lower Rio Negro basin in the State of Amazonas near Manaus is the focus of this case paper. This is one of the integrated projects conducted by IPE - Instituto de Pesquisas Ecológicas (*Institute for Ecological Research*), a non-governmental organization that has been promoting socio-environmental programs in the region since 2002.

<2> The Context

The Rio Negro River is one of the largest tributaries in the Amazon basin, extending from Brazil's border with Colombia and Venezuela to the city of Manaus, capital of the State of Amazonas. The lower section of the river, from the town of Novo Airão to Manaus, is connected by river and by a 170 km paved road. This region is part of the Central Amazon Ecological Corridor, which is the largest contiguous environmentally protected area in the world. The ecological and social relevance of this ecosystem is based on its rich diversity and is thus of great conservation importance (Brasil, 2002). Within this Corridor are two National Parks, both Natural Heritage sites, as well as seven other protected areas, making up a legally decreed mosaic (Fig X.1).

Traditional populations are located along the margins of the Rio Negro and maintain a direct relationship with the environment, with a strong daily dependence on agriculture and extractive activities that include hunting and fishing. IPE works directly with 27 of the over 50 traditional communities (Fig X.2) that exist in the region, and with only one exception, the project communities are small (Figure X.3).

Since 2003, IPÊ has brought tourism stakeholders together in workshops, training sessions, mini-courses and lectures held in the communities, in Manaus and in the protected areas. Initially, each entity worked separately and by integrating them, it has helped insure that everyone identifies common goals, understands ways that communities can benefit from tourism, clarifying which activities are permitted in each category of protected area and how to convey information in an interpretive manner. IPE promoted a Community-based Tourism (CBT) Forum that brought together participants from government institutions, NGOs, local tourism operators, universities and communities. Monthly meetings give members opportunities to discuss problems and learn about new initiatives.

<3> IPÊ's Experience in Sustainable Tourism

Some of IPÊ projects in the region enhance Sustainable Tourism, such as the Pied Tamarin *Saguinus bicolor*. This project is composed of research, environmental education, and agroforestry, and contributes with the dissemination of sound information on the importance of conservation and ways to promote environmental interpretation. This encourages broad discussions and has led community members to receive tourists themselves offering some of the activities described below.

<1> A pilot interpretative trail with a chance to see the the Pied Tamarin

The Pied Tamarin Trail offers tourists information acquired through research on the *Saguinus bicolor*, a primate endemic to Manaus and threatened due to its geographic distribution. The Trail was designed so visitors could understand the habitat of the Pied Tamarin, offering them an experience of being in primary and secondary *terra firme* rainforests. Interpretative signs in Portuguese and in English explain the Pied Tamarin's habits and community guides have been trained to lead groups along the trail.

In 2012, small groups began visiting the trail. This was combined with a visit to a women's group that makes candy and jam from local fruits, so the experience is completed with a snack especially prepared for the tourists.

<2> Women's groups and their contribution

Women now make candies from the tropical fruits harvested from their own backyards. IPÊ began to work with them on quality control, production and sales, and ways to market their final product, as distances are huge. They showed creativity by varying the fruits they use according to their availability throughout the year. An exchange among the groups proved to be an effective strategy, as they could teach each other new

skills, understand different challenges and share solutions. What the women earn from the sale of their production contributes significantly to their families' income.

Some women have also participated in the Brazilian Family Agriculture Fair, in Rio de Janeiro. Contact with different people, cultures and products were invaluable, broadening their horizons. They learned about products made in other regions of Brazil and the difficulties of how to get to the market, or how to earn money and at the same time contribute to conservation. The Amazonian women were an example to the others, due to their organizational and business skills, and an happening, as for many it was the first time they traveled out of state and in an airplane.

<3> Community Based Tourism – The Tucorin Trail

Throughout IPE's work in communities, residents expressed an interest in understanding how tourism functions and how they could fully participate in it. Some already worked with the mainstream tourists who were visiting their communities. They began by organizing their handicraft production and slowly adding activities that could make them more actively involved.

Six communities participate in a trail called the Tucorin Trail. They live within protected areas and some are indigenous or partly indigenous. Being part of the Trail means they will be visited by tourists. Access to all of the communities is by river only, so visitors hire a speedboat in Manaus and travel upstream, some spending only a few hours, while others stay several days visiting one or more communities.

<4> Initial Results and Discussion

The relatively low number of tourists has enabled the residents to plan, organize, carry out and then analyze the outcome of the visits. Revenue has been reasonable and the economic opportunities enable residents to invest in improvements. The experience has provided them with direct economic and environmental benefits, which contrasts to the traditional tourism that was offered before. Tourists can now choose their trips and the communities receive direct payment for services from each visitor, thus eliminating the risk of leakage (Ashley & Roe, 1998), where a third party receives a percentage of the tourists' payment. Economic benefits for women has also improved and they can work in their kitchens or in communal settings at their spare time. As Ashley & Roe (1998) mention, benefits are not always economic, but social and

political as well, providing opportunities for education and training, as is the case with the exchange programs and workshops, which provide the learning of new skills on a continuous basis.

As the economic conditions of community members improve, people are then less likely to turn to illegal activities such as logging, thus reducing the threats to the natural resources. Economic opportunities in this region are scarce, and work that derives from a sustainable tourism can be an important alternative when done properly. Besides, the production of handicrafts and local food products for sale have the potential of being sustainable when the raw materials are adequately managed.

By working directly with the tourists, residents can better understand the importance of maintaining product quality, as well as that of the environment. As they benefit from the activities, and enrich their understanding on their own environment, locals become protectors of the natural areas where they live. By adding diversified options to the tourism experience, the communities can add value to the products they offer.

IPÊ has invested in capacity building and community development and, as a result, communities have adopted new practices. A great deal of the traditional knowledge on the making of baskets and necklaces out of local materials has been revived, as much as almost lost when the project began. Residents are now more aware of the importance of their cultural heritage, and they strive to use raw materials that come from sustainable sources.

The initial results indicate that integration of the stakeholders at meetings, workshops and environmental education courses has been critical for the development and the diversity of local tourism activities. These are opportunities for building concepts that share a common objective: to conserve the natural environment and benefit people in a sustainable manner.

There are still many challenges that need attention. For example, many visitors are foreign and local residents do not speak languages other than Portuguese and their indigenous dialects. Another important aspect is the need for continuous monitoring of the product quality and innovation. These are worthwhile observations that can be made while the number of visitors is still small, so indicators can be defined to help monitor the impacts and the quality of what is being offered. The lessons learned can help improve the overall program and its social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Tourism in the lower Rio Negro has increased in the past decade. IPÊ and its partners began to integrate the different sectors and stakeholders to enhance the industry and make it more sustainable. Ground operators and guides are now aware of the different categories of protected areas and which activities are permitted in each. Women's groups are more organized and have improved their family stipends and the quality of their products.

Initial results indicate that the knowledge gained, together with the opportunities of integrating different stakeholders at meetings, workshops and environmental education courses were important for the development and improvement of the local tourism. As a continuous learning experience, it has been important to invest time and energy throughout time, as IPÊ has done, as it has brought about favorable results.

Despite the many challenges that still need attention, there has been substantial progress and more chances of including sustainability as a priority for the tourism trade in the region. Commitment from government institutions proved to be essential, despite the insecurity of the changes that occur due to the political mandates. Tourism operators and agencies now better understand that they must consider the region's social and environmental aspects, embedding conservation at the core of their operations. IPE involves communities in a participatory way at all phases, and local people are now favored with sustainable alternatives to improve their livelihoods. It may take time, but the long-term objective is to achieve successful Community-based Tourism, with the involvement of all of the stakeholders in the lower Rio Negro, turning it into a win-win example that everyone can benefit.

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