

# **The Politics of Ecotourism in Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean**

**Dennis R. Gordon  
Professor of Political Science  
Santa Clara University**

Presented to the annual meeting of the Caribbean Studies Association  
May 29, 2001

Draft-Not for Citation

Kelly Warren served as research assistant on this project. Edward Rooks, Prof. Leslie Gray, and Prof. Janice Edgerly-Rooks have provided important insights on the topic. Financial assistance was provided by The College of Arts and Sciences and International Programs at Santa Clara University.

*The vacation industry is clearly here to stay. But the question which we dare not ignore is whether we, the Caribbean People, are going to have the wit and the will to make it the servant of our needs. If we do not, it will become our master, dispensing pleasure on a curve of diminishing returns while it exacerbates social divisions and widens that legacy of colonialism; the gap between small, comfortable minorities and large majorities barely surviving at the social margin.*<sup>1</sup>

Michael Manley

*Travel into the deep, cool canopy of lush green forest . . . Get in tune with nature, unspolit and modest in its beauty. Qualified guides ensure that the integrity of the landscape is preserved for future generations.*<sup>2</sup>

#### Tourism Brochure, Trinidad & Tobago

The passage from exclusive dependence on primary product extraction and agriculture to a diversified strategy which includes an important role for tourism is a common story in the Caribbean. Indeed, many nations now are heavily reliant on tourism as a fundamental sector of the economy and earner of foreign exchange. Globally tourism is matched in size only by the oil industry and is said to be the world's single largest employer.<sup>3</sup> The effects of tourism have been the object of extensive examination by scholars seeking to understand its economic, political, and social impact on a nation. While there are many opinions about the benefits of tourism, it is safe to say that it is seen as a mixed blessing for many nations. Although tourism may earn foreign exchange and create local jobs, it can continue dependence on unreliable and fickle foreign markets, require significant imported inputs to satisfy the tastes of international visitors, and bring cultural conflict

---

1. Michael Manley, "Forward," Polly Pattullo, *Last Resorts*, (London: Cassell, 1996), p. x.

2. Tourism and Industrial Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited, "Brasso Seco: Treasures Unknown.

3. Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*. Washington: Island Press (1999), p. 9.

both between guests and locals and between locals themselves. Since tourism in the Caribbean is based to a significant degree on the beauty of the natural setting, moreover, increasing visitors and expanding infrastructure raises environmental concerns locally and internationally.

Tourism in the Caribbean has evolved from an industry serving a limited exclusive clientele in small hotels and guesthouses to large resorts, and more recently, all-inclusive superclubs. Tourist arrivals (stop-over visits) grew from 4.5 million in 1987 to 6.9 million in 1996.<sup>4</sup> The rapid number of tourists arriving on cruise ships for short visits has also increased rapidly in recent years. The Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism (CAST) reports that region-wide tourism accounts for roughly 25 percent of exported goods and services and 31 percent of Gross Domestic Product. More than 500,000 people are directly employed in tourism region-wide. Recession and other developments notwithstanding, CAST estimates that there is the potential for another 1.5 million jobs to be created in the tourist sector by the year 2007.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years an additional dimension has been added to the traditional sun, surf, and sand destinations as more visitors have come seeking to observe and experience first hand the flora and fauna which the diverse ecology of tropical islands offer. This nature or adventure tourism has emerged more or less simultaneously with a growing awareness of the irreversible changes to the environment produced by human development. While concern about the social and environmental impact of tourism originally came from nature-seeking visitors, along with local and international interest groups, today governments and a variety of regional and global governmental and non-

---

4. Organization of American States, "Tourism Travel to the Caribbean," electronic database available at [www.oas.org/tourism/stats\\_cr.htm](http://www.oas.org/tourism/stats_cr.htm).

5. Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism, "Economics & Tourism in the Caribbean," electronic report available at [www.cha-cast.com/tourism](http://www.cha-cast.com/tourism).

governmental organizations have initiated programs designed to protect rainforests, beaches, reefs, and indigenous cultures.

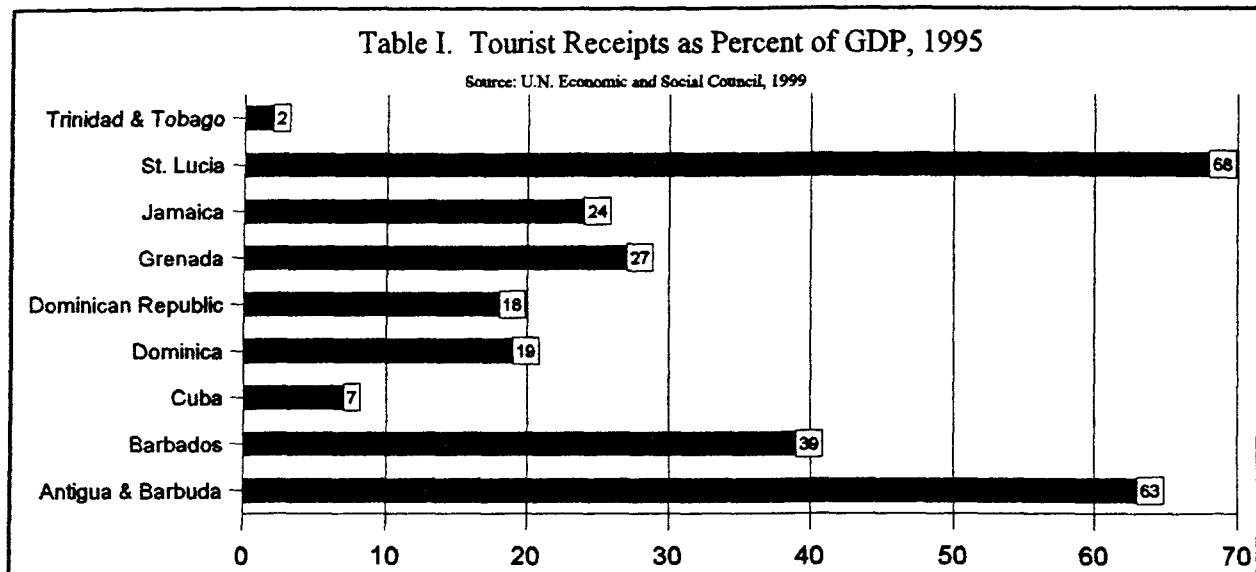
The recognition of the impact of tourism, on both humans and the natural setting, has launched diverse initiatives to establish global and regional regimes governing sustainable and ecotourism. As with other efforts to create international norms and enforcement mechanism, there are significant disagreements on how to define the problem and chose from competing solutions. This paper explores the ecotourism and sustainable tourism movements in the Caribbean, with an emphasis on recent initiatives in Trinidad and Tobago, a relative newcomer to the tourism market. Specific topics discussed include how tourism fits into the development strategies of small Caribbean states, how ecotourism is defined, and the potential contribution of ecotourism regionally and in Trinidad and Tobago. An underlying assumption of this study is that tourism policies, like all aspects of the development dialogue, involve political as well as technical issues and that battles over scarce resources, economic gain, and environmental protection and conservation, are not easily resolved.

### Tourism and Development

Traditionally, the islands of the Caribbean based their economy on extractive industries and agricultural products. The dependency and overall vulnerability of Caribbean economies has been well documented. With independence, many governments sought to diversify into import substitution and export-led growth in manufacturing and off-shore assembly operations. For a time, some nations flirted with economic nationalism and jointed the Non-aligned Movement's battle for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, many Caribbean states have fully embraced neo-liberal models of free trade and aggressively sought foreign

investment.<sup>6</sup>

As import substitution and export led growth did not fulfill the perceived needs of many Caribbean states, tourism assumed a crucial role in job creation and foreign exchange earnings. As Table I indicates, the role of tourism varies in the region with the smaller island states the most dependent. The ascension of tourism to a key role in many economies has changed the way



people live:

*In one generation, the coming of tourism has changed the pattern of employment and the structure of communities for ever. Peasant economies have been molded into service sectors where cane-cutters become bellhops and fishermen are turned into 'water sport officers.' Where statistics exist, the slide away from agriculture into the service sector in the last 30 years (and in some islands the last 15 years) looks dramatic.<sup>7</sup>*

While the "push-pull" factors which led to internal migration and changing life-styles are

---

6. Polly Pattullo, *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean*. London: Cassell, 1996, p. 53.

the result of multiple influences, especially in larger islands such as Jamaica, it is clear that employment and other opportunities resulting from tourism are important. Along with changes in the occupational structure which tourism brings, there are other social changes which are not seen as positive by some scholars and local residents. Degradation of traditional social values and cultural autonomy, along with crime, drugs, and prostitution are attributed to the influence of foreign visitors. Indeed, the social impact of tourism, according to some analysts, represents a continuation of metropolitan dominance begun with slavery and colonialism and continued by the current hegemonic global regime maintained by the major powers. Others see the social relationships as more complex because "tourism is unique as an export industry in that the consumers themselves travel to collect the goods . . . The presence of the customer creates a set of sociocultural consequences missing from other export activities."<sup>8</sup> As the discussion of the negative impact of growing tourism unfolded in the Caribbean, it became clear that the issue might ultimately become moot: there is little certainty that visitors will flow to a given area in a never ending stream. Butler's 1980 study "The Concept of the Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution . . ." described the stages that tourism passes through from discovery to rapid expansion and international recognition, then to a plateau of maturity, and ultimately into decline as visitor tastes change and the once attractive site becomes over saturated and despoiled.<sup>9</sup> One of the most obvious accelerators to the cycle described by Butler is environmental degradation. Speaking specifically of the Caribbean, McElroy and de Albuquerque observed that "the high-volume mass-market style tourism

---

8. Malcolm Crick, "Representations of International Tourism in The Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 18, 1989, p 334.

9. R. W. Butler, "The Concept of the Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for the Management of Resources," *Canadian Geographer*, No. 24, (1980), pp. 5-12.

currently in practice in the region is nonsustainable; it inevitably damages both the amenity base from which it derives and marginalizes domestic agriculture/fishing in this process.”<sup>10</sup>The risk that mass, uncontrolled tourist development posed has been recognized beyond the small circle of conservation oriented scholars and public interest groups.

### Sustainable Tourism

The movement to define and implement policies aimed a sustainable tourism gained momentum throughout the decade of the 1990s. A 1995 survey by the Travel Industry Association of America showed that 83 percent of tourists supported some form of green or sustainable tourism and that they were willing to pay more for their holiday to promote environmental protection.<sup>11</sup> The tourism industry and its allies in government observed the growing public demand for sustainable practices and nature-based holiday experiences. The policy process included a variety of actors ranging from the private sector, government (IGO) and non-governmental (NGO) organizations. As with any discussion of development in the Caribbean, a vast array of interests, points of view, and socio-cultural perspectives have been represented. While it is impossible to catalogue all of the major players here, a brief listing of representative forces would include at the intergovernmental organization level includes The Organization of American States, the Inter-American Travel Congress, the World Tourism Organization, The United Nations Environmental Program, and The United Nations Economic and Social Council.

In the aftermath of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

---

10. Jerome L. McElroy and Klaus de Albuquerque, “An Integrated Sustainable Ecotourism for Small Caribbean Islands,” Indiana Center on Global Change and World Peace, Occasional Paper No. 8, February 1992, p. 7.

11. Honey, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

(Rio Earth Summit), The World Tourism Organization, the World Travel & Tourism Council, and the Earth Council joined to launch “Agenda 21 for the Travel & Tourism Industry: Towards Environmentally Sustainable Development.” This document was designed to aid the public and private sector in implementing and monitoring sustainable tourism practices for local implementation. At the non-governmental level organizations represent a variety of sectors including firms linked to the tourism industry and conservation groups. A good example of the importance now attached to the environmental and social consequences of tourism is the creation of high profile private sector organizations such as Green Globe. Green Globe was established by the World Travel and Tourism Council in 1994 to promote environmental awareness and to develop a private sector certification process recognizing practices consistent with the industry’s definition of sustainable tourism (which includes practices “that make use of our environment without damaging it [and] ways that allow all local people to benefit from tourism without destroying their culture”).<sup>12</sup>

In the Caribbean region, the Caribbean Hotel Association established the Caribbean Action for Sustainable Tourism (CAST). CAST offers a variety of services including technical assistance to local enterprises supporting sustainability and “overview maintenance of minimum Green Globe Caribbean criteria and award certification.” The list of CAST members includes:

- American Airlines
- Cable & Wireless
- Holiday Inn
- Bacardi
- American Express
- Caribbean Tourism Organization
- Green Globe

---

12. “Green Globe21-About Us,” [www.greenglobe21.com](http://www.greenglobe21.com).



- Texaco Caribbean
- Scotiabank

The private sector organizations advocating that their members adhere to sustainable tourism practices have tried hard to catch the travelling public's eye. Critics contend that Green Globe is concerned primarily with publicity and offering a set of goals rather than strict enforcement of meaningful standards. Questioning the ultimate utility of industry self-regulation, Martha Honey states that accepting in principle environmental standards is enough to earn a business Green Globe certification. Lacking an objective and independent verification of compliance, in Honey's opinion, renders Green Globe "little more than a marketing ploy."<sup>13</sup>

NGO actors include advocacy groups from many perspectives. NGOs operating globally including the World Wildlife Fund, World Conservation Union, and the Nature Conservancy. These organizations have set standards, established research programs, and offered tours based on sustainable practices. The activities offered by these groups have been funded by various IGOs and national governments, including the United States Agency for International Development. In the Caribbean, the region-wide list includes the Caribbean Conservation Association and a host of NGO groups.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, there are many different definitions of sustainability given the array of interests and political perspectives surrounding tourism. For the most part, those active in the pursuit of sustainable tourism share the assumption that mass tourism will remain a path to increased economic activity. In this regard, the sustainable tourism perspective shares much with the general pursuit of sustainable development. As such, its proponents favor growth and

---

13. Honey, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

14. The Caribbean Conservation Association lists 80 NGO members.

development, but with the goal of avoiding “killing the golden goose” through environmental damage, over crowding, and trampling of local cultural values. In 1988 the World Tourism Organization stated that sustainable tourism is “envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.”<sup>15</sup>

Virtually all Caribbean governments, either in their rhetoric, through legislation or policy initiatives, have embraced sustainable tourism. There are, of course, many gaps between stated policy and the resources available for enforcement and the infrastructure to cope with water pollution, coastal erosion, poaching, and other harmful practices. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine all aspects of sustainable tourism initiatives in the Caribbean. If sustainable tourism faces obstacles to implementation, what of ecotourism which entails an even more demanding set of standards?

It is important to understand that sustainable tourism, while being embraced by many sectors of society, is not the same as ecotourism either in its practices nor in its impact on a nation’s overall development strategy. The United Nations, in proclaiming 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism stated:

A clear distinction should be made between the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism: the term ecotourism itself refers to a segment within the tourism sector, while the sustainability principles should apply to all types of tourism activities, operations, establishments and projects, including conventional and alternative forms.<sup>16</sup>

---

15. United Nations Environment Programme, “International Year of Ecotourism,” electronic version available at [www.world-tourism.org](http://www.world-tourism.org).

16. *Ibid.*

## Ecotourism

The term *ecotourism* has been widely applied to a variety of activities and enterprises. Until recently little effort has been made to establish a definition. An exhaustive study conducted under the auspices of the Organization of American States and the University of Idaho found that “no single definition of ecotourism dominates the Americas. Instead, a range of definitions was identified across the governmental tourism agencies studied and the majority are ‘homegrown’ definitions.” Of the 53 agencies contacted in Latin America and the Caribbean, the study’s authors found that 25 provided a written definition of ecotourism and that 21 of the 25 definitions were “homegrown”<sup>17</sup>.

Ecotourism involves a much more complex set of standards and activities than popularly conceived notions of nature or adventure tourism. It goes without saying that, lacking clear standards or certification authorities, many tour operators play upon the public’s desire to take in the local natural sights. Indeed, promotion of supposed ecotourist sites has become ubiquitous in public and private promotions of Caribbean tourism. In going beyond sustainable, nature, and adventure tourism, common components of most definitions of ecotourism include:

- 1) Nature-based tourism in which the main motivation of the tourist is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
2. Tourism which contains educational and interpretation features.
3. Tourism which is usually but not exclusively organized for small groups by small locally owned businesses and/or community groups.
4. Tourism which minimizes negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment.

---

17. Stephen N. Edwards, *et. al.*, *Comparative Study of Ecotourism Policy in the Americas-1998*, Vol. 1, 1998, p. 2.

5. Tourism which supports the protection of natural areas by:

-generating economic benefits for local host communities, organizations and authorities charged with managing natural areas

-increasing awareness towards conservation of the natural setting and cultural protection both among locals and visitors.

-providing employment and income opportunities for local communities distinct from existing pursuits which threaten the environment and reduce the sustainability of tourism and other occupations.<sup>18</sup>

Some organizations and individuals add more overtly political criteria in defining ecotourism. While the WTO states that a positive side effect of tourism will increased awareness of respect for human rights, others contend that support for human rights and democratic movements is essential to real ecotourism, not a beneficial bi-product. "Mass tourism, in Martha Honey's view, "typically pays scant attention to the political system of the host country or struggles within it . . . Ecotourists therefore need to be sensitive to the host country's political environment and social climate and need to consider the merits of international boycotts called for by those supporting democratic reforms . . ." <sup>19</sup>

The inclusion of a specific political criteria to the already significant social and economic requirements of ecotourism increases the potential for disagreements over an already volatile subject. Most governments, including those in the English-speaking Caribbean with a tradition of generally respecting human rights, are not fond of being lectured by visitors from North America or Europe about their internal political relations. Leaving aside the overt conflicts resulting from linking human rights criteria, what general outcomes can be expected from promoting ecotourism

---

18. Adapted from United Nations Economic Programme, *op. cit.*

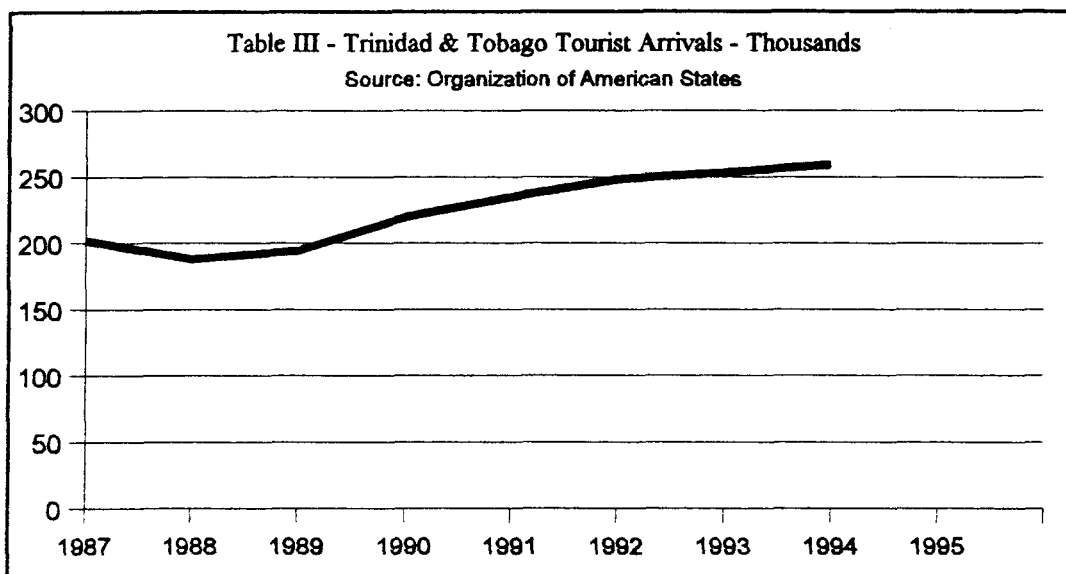
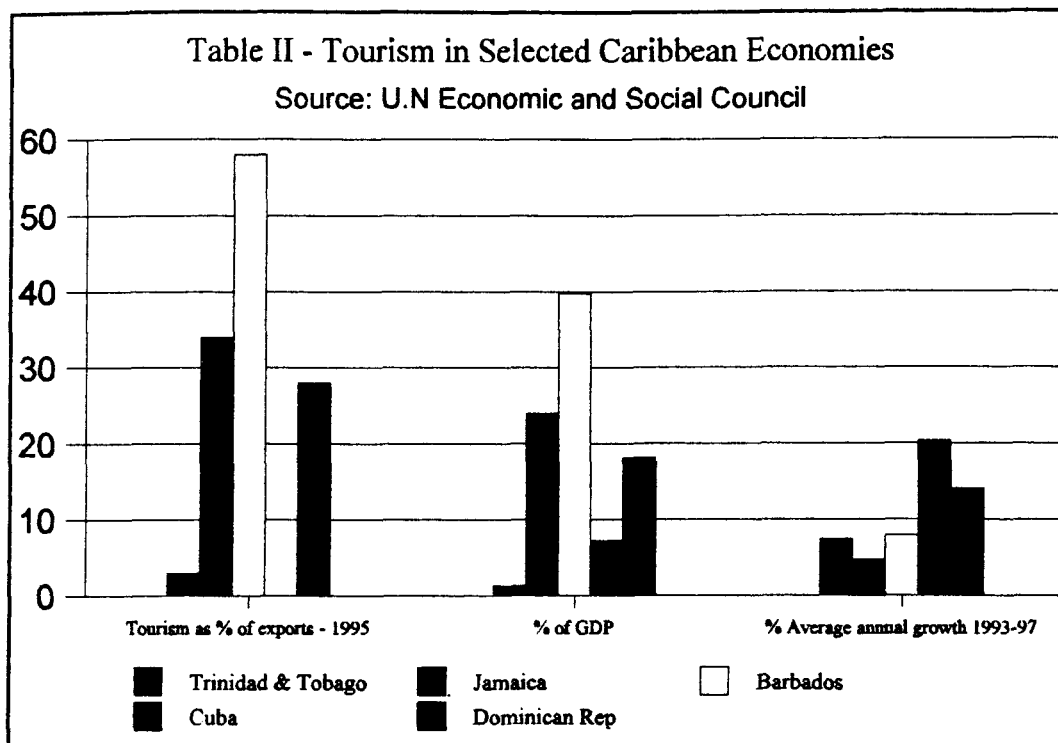
19. Honey, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

based on the characteristics listed above? To explore these potential outcomes further, we take a brief look at Trinidad and Tobago.

### Tourism and Ecotourism in Trinidad & Tobago

Many Caribbean nations have included both sustainable and ecotourism principles in varying degrees in their approach to tourism marketing and management. Belize and Costa Rica are often cited as nations which have made ecotourism the center of their tourism-based development initiatives. Trinidad and Tobago represent somewhat of a special case in that the overall scope of tourism in the economy is comparatively small. The small scale of the tourist industry sector means that, with some important exceptions in Tobago, there are relatively few entrenched interests taking part in the policy process. Only recently has the government begun to examine in a systematic way what role tourism may play in the twin island republic, and this exploration has taken place concurrently with a growing environmental awareness in the nation. Thus questions about the sustainability of tourism and the role of ecotourism have been present as the public and private sectors looked to increasing visitors as a supplement to oil, natural gas, and other sectors of the economy.

As seen in Table I, as late as 1995, tourism provided only 2 percent of Trinidad and Tobago's GDP. Table II offers additional regional comparisons of the scope of tourism and Table III depicts the rate of growth in tourist arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago.



Tourism in Trinidad and Tobago differs not only overall size when compared to its Caribbean neighbors, but also in the purpose of the visit. According to the Organization of American States, 54 percent of visitors in 1996 came on a private holiday whereas 14 percent were on a hotel-based visit. Hotel-based tourism, however, has played a larger role in Tobago, and the traditional small hotels and guesthouses have been joined by larger establishments, especially in Crown Point and adjacent areas. Growth in Cruise ship arrivals has proven inconsistent in recent years, dropping from 50,952 visitors in 1996 to 31,880 in 1997. Growth returned in 1998 with 43,188 arriving passengers and 63,251 in 1999. Another area of important growth, especially in Trinidad, has been in hosting yachting events and pleasure boat maintenance. Trinidad's location offers reduced insurance rates during hurricane season and boaters now come for longer stays and for repair and maintenance offered by the growing number of boat yards. Yacht arrivals grew by 366 percent from 637 arrivals in 1990 to 2,970 in 1999.<sup>20</sup>

While somewhat of a late-comer overall to tourism, Trinidad and Tobago have long attracted visitors interested in nature. Thanks to the overall beauty of the islands, along with wide diversity of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife, Trinidad and Tobago years ago developed a small nature tourism industry. The rainforests of Trinidad's Northern Range are home to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, a nature-based lodge which, in many people's view, has been hosting ecotourists long before the term was developed.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre opened its doors to guests in 1967 and since then thousands of visitors have walked its trails, learned about the rainforest environment, sampled local foods grown on the former coco estate, and been hosted by residents of the surrounding community. Over

---

20. Tourism and Industrial Development Corporation of Trinidad & Tobago, Limited, 2000.

the years, the Centre has received numerous awards and attracted global attention for its approach to ecotourism. Foreign visitors to Asa Wright have increased steadily, growing from 1571 in 1997 to 2400 in 1999. The Centre also receives over 8000 day visitors per year, many of whom are school children. According to one study, Asa Wright Centre's "reputation as the first facility on the island dedicated to nature tourism, its longevity and success, has made it the catalyst for much of the recent impetus for many of the newer eco-tourism ventures on the island."<sup>21</sup>

The economic potential of tourism, including nature and ecotourism, has not been lost on the government nor private investors in Trinidad and Tobago. In 1995, the government's Tourism Master Plan was formulated to "capitalise on tourism's potential for economic growth and diversification." The plan calls for a number of initiatives including protecting the islands' resource base, linking tourism to the nation's social objectives, improving infrastructure and training, emphasizing cultural events, and creating and enhancing natural and cultural attractions in designated tourism development areas.<sup>22</sup>

The Tourism and Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO), is charged with promoting tourism within a context of the Master Plan. Cognizant of their position in the highly competitive global tourism market, TIDCO has developed a niche marketing strategy designed to exploit each island's unique attractions. The "Terrific Trinidad" campaign emphasizes culture and events, hosting cruise ships, while "Tranquil Tobago" concentrates on promotion and development of the dive sector, weddings and honeymoons, and golf holidays. Both islands promote hosting

---

21. For a review of the history of the Asa Wright Centre see: *Asa Wright Nature Centre*, data missing.

22. "The Tourism Master Plan", [www.tidco.co.tt/corporate/report/tourism/intro-plan](http://www.tidco.co.tt/corporate/report/tourism/intro-plan).



conventions and meetings, game fishing, and what TIDCO labels “Eco/Soft Adventure” tourism. Promotions focusing on Eco/Soft tourism have included cooperation with the Asa Wright Nature Centre and Pax Guesthouse to attract the global birding community, participation in horticultural shows, and using the media to expand upon the publicity the nation received by being featured in David Attenborough’s television series “The Life of Birds.”

The development of a tourism plan and the inclusion of environmental concerns and ecotourism principles in the nation’s development strategy was not, of course, due solely to the foresight of government officials. Along with Asa Wright, a number of other projects have proved successful in recent years. The Matura Turtle Cooperative is an example of a grassroots community effort to protect an endangered species while creating a tourism-based source of employment for locals. The Pax Guesthouse, which has long served as a retreat and holiday refuge away from the bustle of nearby Port of Spain, is transforming itself into a birding and nature center. A new private initiative to build a model ecotourist center is being undertaken by the Paria Springs Trust in Trinidad’s Northern Range.

Sustainable and ecotourism projects have proceeded against a backdrop of increased politicization of environmental issues. In recent years there have been significant public organization to prevent development or outright destruction of natural areas. Examples of popular mobilization around environmental issues includes the Nariva Swamp, Toco on the North East Coast, and Caroni Swamp to name a few. On Tobago, citizen action has focused on a variety of development projects, including the highly controversial Four Seasons resort. The NGO Environment Tobago pursues a multi-faceted strategy involving public education, technical studies, and direct advocacy.

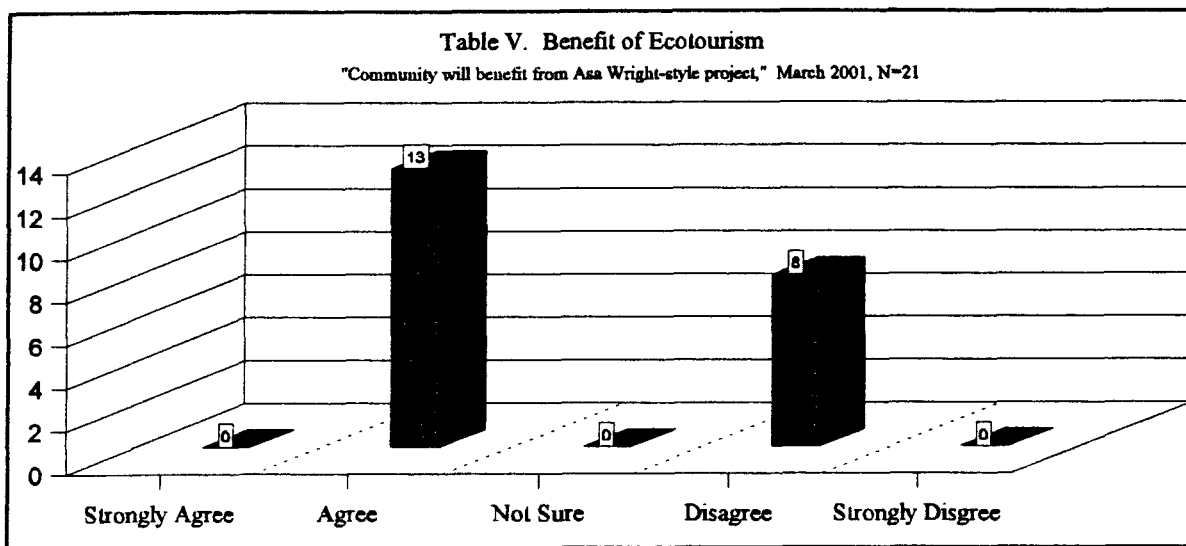
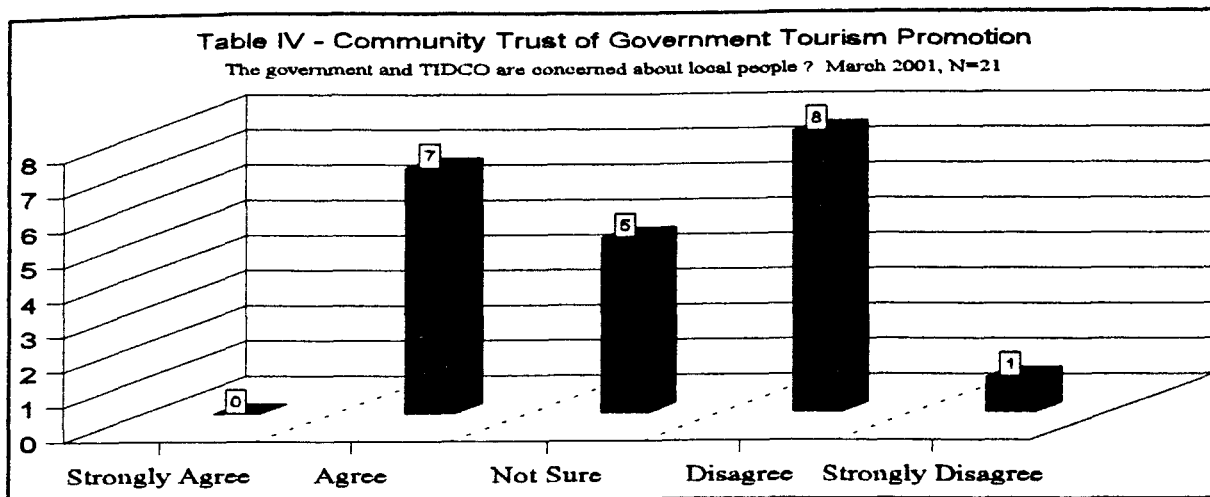
Local communities are increasingly aware of the promise and peril of tourism and the potential advantages of managed interaction with visitors under the rubric of ecotourism. The Toco Foundation states that tourism can be a very important factor in the development of the North East Coast providing it results from a consultative process which produces self-reliance, productive jobs, family or community-based hotels, and a balance between the local population, natural resources, and the capacity of the environment to tolerate visitors.<sup>23</sup>

Tourism is on the rise in Trinidad's Northern Range as various organizations and entrepreneurs seek to capitalize on the reputation of Asa Wright and the natural beauty of the region. An ecotourism center and guest lodge is being established by the Paria Springs Trust near the village of Brasso Seco. A 2001 survey of local residents of Brasso Seco reveals guarded optimism about the benefits of ecotourism.<sup>24</sup> 19 of 21 residents contacted agreed that tourism was on the rise in the district. While 17 of the 21 felt that local households were benefitting from hosting visitors, the positive responses were qualified with statements such as "some, but not all," or only a "small minority." Table IV depicts popular perceptions of the government's role in promoting beneficial tourism and Table V shows views of the benefits of having an Asa Wright style center bordering on the community of Brasso Seco.

---

23. "Obtain Sustainable Development through Environmental Protection," *Eastern Voice*, Vol. 2, No 2, May 1999.

24. Field interviews conducted in Brasso Seco, March 2001.



The results from Table IV are not surprising and may reflect the public's general skepticism about the government's ability to deliver services nationwide as well as to a very remote mountain community. Table V shows a community expecting economic benefits but with a sizeable minority yet to be convinced that tourism will offer new opportunities. Respondents biggest concern was whether the Paria Springs ecolodge would compete with or complement village lodging, guide, and

other services. Many respondents cautioned that while they were optimistic, benefits would only come if the tourism project is “geared toward the community and have the community at heart.” One resident, fearing that the tourists would change the village’s way of life, commented “when tourists come in they will stop us from doing our hunting that we do for eating and as a lifestyle and that is a bad thing.”

Beyond the local effects of Eco/Soft projects, two key questions remain about ecotourism in Trinidad and Tobago: 1) will ecotourism prove sustainable and afford protection for fragile scenic areas, habitat, and species, and 2) will ecotourism provide a level of economic development consistent with public and government expectations?

Question 1, the sustainability of ecotourism, is primarily a matter of political will. While there remains much scientific work to be done to survey and catalogue Trinidad and Tobago’s natural endowment, the largest areas of concern—urban encroachment, unauthorized farming and destructive agricultural practices, squatting, water pollution, wetland and reef destruction, poaching, and erosion,—are well known and the subject of increased public debate. Institutionally, the government’s National Environmental Policy commits the government to conserve biodiversity, use renewable resources in a sustainable manner, conserve non-renewable resources, preserve the ecological systems that maintain clear air and water, educate to change personal attitudes and empower communities to care for their own environments. In theory, The Environmental Management Agency, under the auspices of the 1995 Environmental Management Act, is responsible for implementing the nation’s overall environmental policy.

Like many other governments, actual oversight of environment related issues is conducted by a variety of agencies. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land, and Marine Resources has a formidable

portfolio. Its subsidiary agencies, including the Forestry Divisions' Wildlife and National Parks sections, and the Fisheries Division are spread thin and operate under what may be a conflicting mandate of both expanding utilization and protecting natural resources. Local authorities in Tobago, operating under the Tobago House of Assembly, include the Forestry and Fishing Departments.

The government has attempted to create a funding base to support sustainable tourism through taxes such as the Green Fund Environmental Tax on business. Promotion of the active participation of local citizens and stakeholders, based in part on the model developed by the Matura Turtle Cooperative, is pursued through the Honorary Game Warden System. As with other areas of national life, however, there are significant gaps between environmental policy and enforcement. Staff from the Forestry Division report a dire lack of resources in dealing with poaching, squatting, and other environmental threats. Staff often feel figuratively, if not literally, outgunned by poachers and others illegally using public lands. Citizen groups accuse the government of repeatedly turning a blind eye to violations committed by influential persons. The Caroni Swamp, whose proximity to both Port of Spain and Piarco Airport should make it the centerpiece of Trinidad's Eco/Soft tourism campaign, is seriously threatened. "... the problems that beset Caroni Swamp," according to local guides, "are a reflection of what is happening throughout Trinidad and Tobago: an ecological and tourism time-bomb born of mismanagement, misguided priorities, over-stretched resources, pollution, poaching, and public ignorance and indifference."<sup>25</sup>

---

24 Mark Meredith, "Sorry Tales From the Swamp," *Sunday Express*, Section 2, February 27, 2000, p. 4.

The public is increasingly aware of the importance of environmental issues overall and informed about specific controversies. Large scale illegal rice cultivation in the Nariva Swamp, road construction on the North Coast, and a proposed shipping terminal near the village of Toco produced significant public opposition and mobilization. The forces which challenge environmental protection and sustainable tourism, however, are complex. Along with the trade-offs between short term economic gain and long range protection faced by many nations, local practices in Trinidad and Tobago, such as the domestic and export exotic bird and fish trade, the harvesting of plants for medicinal and ceremonial purposes, hunting, timber felling for furniture and handicrafts, may involve a cultural as well as an economic dimension.

Assuming for the moment that the major impediments to environmental protection are overcome, the question of ecotourism's contribution to the nation's economic goals remain. In nations such as Barbados or Cuba, where tourism is seen as a major component of development strategy, projects which meet ecotourism standards are not likely to be major foreign exchange producers. Ecotourism, by its very nature, is a small scale operation. While this may be partially offset by the high price of ecotourism holidays compared with large scale super resorts, the overall economic benefits of ecotourist enterprises will not expand dramatically beyond the local community. For nations expecting tourism to provide a significant portion of the gross domestic product, the temptation to offer sham ecotourist sites therefore will be great.

In Trinidad and Tobago, where the economy does not rise or fall on the tourist dollar, ecotourism sites may carve out a niche which will aid local communities while enhancing the nation's overall international image as a destination for visitors interested in nature. The government, acting through various agencies has utilized the international reputation of Asa Wright

and other destinations to attract visitors. Venerable members of the tourism sector, from Man-of-War Bay Cottages in the north of Tobago to Pax Guesthouse in Trinidad, have moved to adopt sustainable practices. There is significant evidence that ecotourism will create economic opportunities for the local community. The effect on local agriculture is a good example. In considering the ability of tourism to stimulate agricultural production in the Caribbean, Janet Henshall Momsen found that while large scale enterprises tended to rely on imported food, ecotourism represented a new form of consumerism “which demands healthy natural food produced by a sustainable agriculture that does not damage the environment.”<sup>26</sup> Trinidad and Tobago’s cultural diversity, as reflected in local cuisine, is one of the attractions of Brasso Seco and its other ecotourism centers. Emphasizing locally grown and prepared dishes creates opportunities for both local farmers and cooks to develop new sources of income.

Building the tourism sector on the strength of Trinidad and Tobago’s ecotourism reputation, however, presents many challenges. The infrastructure to provide water treatment facilities for the isolated communities fronting some of Tobago’s most beautiful bays, for example, will be very costly and technically difficult. Discharge from private yachts and cruise ships is a growing regulatory problem. The thousands of people coming to Asa Wright each year, moreover, pose threats as well as income opportunities. The single road leading to the center must carry thousands of vehicles. Illegal farming, squatting, and a nearby quarry all reflect the conflicting activities and priorities that the government and public hold. The TIDCO’s Tourism Master Plan may well be contradictory in regards to both sustainable and ecotourism. In the case of Tobago, for example,

---

26. Janet Henshall Momsen, “Caribbean Tourism and Agriculture: New Linages in the Global Era,” *Caribbean Development Policies in a Neoliberal Era*. (Data missing), p. 122.

emphasizing traditional tourist attractions such as game fishing, the dive sector, and golf simultaneously while simultaneously trying to protect fragile reefs and bays will require detailed planning and oversight which may be beyond the resources the government or private sector are willing or able to commit. The continued controversy over a large scale project in Tobago involving a golf course and marina created tension which spread to the highest levels of government. While this controversy was more about longstanding conflicts between the nation's dominant political personalities, it nonetheless raised a variety of issues about local versus national priorities and the environment.

### Conclusions

As with the overall question of economic development in the Caribbean, the need for sustainability has become the watch word in the tourism sector. A variety of public and private initiatives, standards, and oversight programs have emerged. In many ways, the pursuit of sustainable tourism faces the same pressures from the contradictions of growth-based and profit-oriented 21<sup>st</sup> Century neo-liberalism as other economic sectors. Caribbean tourism, especially ecotourism, faces the added pressure of needing to not only sustain output, but to preserve and conserve both the natural setting and the local culture. Given the growing popular interest in nature, adventure, and ecotourism, the temptation to “make a fast buck” will continue to challenge the various international regimes aiming to set standards and provide enforcement. The embracing of sustainable tourism by the industry itself is welcomed in some quarters but seen as little more than a marketing gimmick by critics. While the efforts to set and enforce standards will not satisfy strict conservationists or bioregionalists who believe that humans ought not to interject themselves into every corner of the earth, ecotourism does offer alternative livelihoods which will sustain local



communities while reducing impact on the environment.

Trinidad and Tobago, less dependent on tourism overall, may well be able to sustain ecotourist projects which serve both local and national needs. Significant questions remain, however, as to the overall commitment of important public and private interests in putting off short-term gains to establish enforceable ecotourism and related environmental protection standards. Ultimately, a great deal of confusion remains about ecotourism, its economic potential, and its role in preserving fragile natural resources. This confusion, which stems from the global to the local level, is reflected in the opinions of the people of Brasso Seco, who when asked "What does the word Ecotourism mean to you?" offered the following replies:

-ecotourism is awareness of your surroundings . . . increased appreciation of all you are born and grow with.

-ecotourism is living in a natural setting, protection, conservation . . . keeping the place as it is with tourism as a part . . . the community also being stewards of the environment.

-I don't know

-ecotourism means that tourists will be coming in??

-ecotourism is a good thing to put us in business.

-enhancing the natural environment and preserving it for tourists to come in

-tourists . . . spending their money and we profit from that

-I don't know

-going into small business

-ecotourism=success