

Ethics and Amazonian Tourism

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### Abstract

In this paper the ethics of tourism in the Amazon region, mainly Brazil, is discussed. There are many negative environmental impacts that follow the tourism industry of the region, yet most impacts remained overlooked and overshadowed due to the monetary value of the industry. The ethics concerning the physical environment, the flora and fauna of the region, and the culture are all discussed in detail in relation to tourism. Finally a recap of an educational trip, studying natural resource sustainability is discussed and the ethical dilemmas that the students faced during the experience.

## Introduction to the Region

The Amazon region is a place glorified in all forms of media, ranging from National Geographic magazines to the animated films of Disney/Pixar. All across the world the Amazon captures the imaginations of millions, and creates an almost enchanting allure. This allure stems from the mysteriousness and vastness the region entails. The Amazon River basin covers over 6,700,000 square kilometers, twice the size of India, holds roughly ten percent of all the world's known flora and fauna species, and is home to over 350 ethnic groups (World Wildlife Foundation, 2017). The Amazon river is the main artery of the northern South America; it is the second longest river in the world, but the world's largest by volume. The Amazon River alone contains twenty percent of all the fresh water that flows into the oceans each year, making the Amazon River basin the largest hydrographic network on Earth. The Amazon river basin spreads across nine South American countries, namely Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela. Approximately 60% of the Amazon basin and rainforest is found in Brazil. The Brazilian Amazon is located mainly in two states, Amazonia in the north and Para in the south (Divino and McAleer, 2008).

In the heart of this vast region of rivers and rainforest, lies the largest city in the Brazilian Amazon, the capital of Amazonia, Manaus. Manaus is nestled between the banks of the Amazon River's two main tributaries, the Rio Solimoes and the Rio Negro (Divino and McAleer, 2008). Manaus is home to over 1,800,000 residents, it offers a large port for ocean going ships 1500 kilometers from the sea, and is an ecotourism and cultural hotspot. The physical beauty, outdoor recreational opportunities, and various cultures of the region draw people to the banks of the Amazon, and the streets of Manaus in vast numbers each year.

An “Amazon Adventure” is more common than most would expect. Today Brazil is the most visited country in the continent of South America, and in 2014 had over 6,400,000 visitors cross its borders (World Bank Group, 2016). The average expense for a single couple taking a one week long trip is roughly, 5,000 US dollars. This price covers from flights to food, but the money provides a needed boost to the economy of the Amazon. Much like New Jersey’s local shore communities, many people in Manaus rely on these tourists to support their families. This fact leaves the area in an ethical dilemma of how to effectively manage the tourism. This dilemma can be described in one simple question, what is more important money or the environment?

### An Ethical Dilemma

Every individual person has a set of morals that they live by, the balance between what is right and what is wrong. This is known as the person's ethics, their own thoughts of what is good and bad. When these ethics, or morals, contradict one another, an ethical dilemma arises. Ethical dilemma can be further defined as, issues of conflict and choice that are central to moral dilemmas. Moral dilemmas or ethical problems invariably involve conflict, choosing between equally desirable or undesirable alternatives, or balancing options (Braunack-Mayer, 2001). Ethical dilemmas come in all forms, shapes, and sizes. They can be as small as eating a donut or going to the gym, or as large as, and important as the dilemma of continuing ecotourism throughout the Amazon and balancing the negative impacts that come with it. Every dilemma comes with a choice, and a fate for the chosen. The decision made about the ethical dilemma

facing ecotourism in the Amazon and the effects that follow, will have lasting impacts only time will reveal.

### Ethics of the Physical Environment

As people hike through the magnificent Amazon rainforest or ride in boats up the Amazon River, they are soaking up the sights, the sounds, the smells, the all around feeling of the Amazon region. They are all too busy enjoying the scenery and experiencing the environment to even begin to notice the impacts that they leave with every foot print. Erosion is plaguing the rainforest each and every day. At the epicenter is deforestation and logging, which accounts for the majority of the damages. Normal soil under a forested canopy erodes at 0.2 to 10 tons per hectare annually, but soil that has had their forest removed can reach erosion rates as high as 10,000 tons per hectares annually (Rainforest Conservation Fund, 2010). Deforestation is occurring for a number of reasons, illegal wood trade, development of farmland, and the expansion of overall development. With new development, tourism is soon to follow. Deforestation is cutting deeper and deeper into the Amazon rainforest, allowing easier access for tourist and the tourism industry. Tourism itself increases the rate of erosion in the Amazon rainforest. Trails are formed to allow accessible hiking which create shoots and channels for water to erode the soils. New paths made by adventurous hikers, loosen the ground and over time cause further erosion.

Water, much like soils, are affected by tourism each and everyday. A vast fleet of vessels arrive and depart through the port at Manaus, leaving a trail of environmental degradation behind them. The most harmful of these vessels are the pleasure crafts which never leave the river, thus

do not have to comply with international environmental regulations and standards. These pleasure vessels combine to form over 20% of the fleet that utilizes the port daily (Marine Traffic, 2017). The vessels are often below the safety standards of similar vessels in the US, and leak oil, gas, and diesel fuels directly into the waterways being traveled. These pollutants kill a variety of flora and fauna that call the river systems home. The average boats in the fleet carry approximately sixty passengers and make the same travel routes multiple times a day. With every boat making multiple passes through the river each day, the number of pollutants grow exponentially. The growing number of pollutants all stem back to the tourism industry and the desire for tourists to get the “full Amazon experience.”

#### Ethics of the Flora and Fauna

Unlike the soil and water, people do in fact take notice to the flora and fauna of the region. The plants and animals are most often the driving force for tourism in the Amazon. Many tourists flock to the region for ecotourism, tourism revolving around nature. The Amazon is home to 10% of the world’s known species and speculated to be home to many more undiscovered species (WWF, 2017). Many tourists are bird watchers, others are fisherman, but the vast majority are interested in seeing biodiversity that can not be matched anywhere else in the world. This influx of people to the region often have negative effect to the flora and fauna.

There is over 40,000 known flora species in the Amazon, and from their perspective, there are several levels of damages caused by the tourism industry (WWF, 2017). The first aspect that comes to mind is the immediate physical damage people cause to the plants. People often carve initials into the trees, pull off leaves, break branches, and crush newly sprouting

plants as they hike through the jungle. These are just the immediate damage caused by their travels, but there is further unseen damages. Erosion plays a large part of this, having people wander off trails loosens the soil from roots often leaving the plant with inadequate soil to survive. The damage continues beyond this, often years down the road. After returning back to their homes, tourists often desire the same quality wooden furniture as they witnessed in the Amazon, so they find a way to purchase their own. This desire for often rare or endangered wood, drives the deforestation rates and adds fuel to the fire of the illegal logging industry. This is connection of tourism and environmental damage creates a vicious cycle that has yet to be broken.

Plants are not the only affected organisms that call the Amazon region home, in fact the harm is more visible in the animal communities. The Amazon is home to some of the world's most unique animals species, and some of the most endangered. Some of the most magnificent megafauna in the world call this region home, some of the most notable being, the three toed sloth, the pink river dolphin, and the jaguar, all of which are listed and threatened or endangered (Pantas, 2011). A major effect on animal caused by tourism is habitat loss, which connects the animals, to the plants, and all back to deforestation. Habitat is lost for reasons previously mentioned, and the animals that previously inhabited the area are now forced to new smaller and often fragmented home ranges.

The other, more visible effect of tourism on the animals, is the changes in their behavior. Animals which are naturally fearful of humans, now view them as a food source instead of a predator. This is a common occurrence throughout the world. One study in a Costa Rican national park found that wild monkeys turned into garbage feeders, becoming familiar with the



presence of ecotourists and eating the food and rubbish left behind (Kennedy, 2017). Similar behaviors are expressed in bears in the US parks, and in the Kuati in Foz de Iguacu, Brazil.

During a January trip, two notable examples of adapted animal behavior in the Amazon were observed. The first was the behavior of capuchin monkeys which lived behind a floating restaurant. Capuchin monkeys are naturally fearful of humans, but these monkeys were not. These monkeys saw humans as a food source, since droves of tourists feed them banana slices in exchange for a simple photograph. While walking on the planks, the monkeys approached us with their hands extended waiting for their sweet treats, a learned, unnatural behavior. The second example came from the pink river dolphins, and the fact that we were able to swim with them, uncaged and freely. These dolphins were trained to tolerate human contact in return for all the fish snacks they desire. The dolphins listen for the slapping on the water caused by the trainer, and arrive at the desired spot waiting for their treats. In return for their cooperation they are fed their treats and humans are able to touch the magnificent animals. This is a very unnatural, but learned behavior.

Tourism is the only reason these behaviors were created. Tourists want to have contact with the wildlife, and the closer the better. The locals then change the behavior of these wild animals through the techniques described by Pavlov and the experiments he conducted using his dogs and a bell. These animals overtime become accustomed to being within close proximity to humans because they are given food with little to no negative impacts. Over time this modifies the behavior of the animals to view humans as a source of food instead of source of danger. If it were not for the desire of tourist to be in close contact with these wild animals, these behaviors would never arise naturally.

The ethical dilemma that arises is that, is it really ethical to train these animals the way they are being taught? It is great for tourism to have these animals come within such close contact with the paying customers, but is it fair for the animals to not recognize a potential predator, and embrace potential danger instead of fleeing from it. This dilemma will continue to be at the forefront of the Amazon as long as ecotourism is alive and active.

### Ethics of the Culture and People

The rippling effects of tourism does not stop at the physical environment, nor does it halt by affecting the flora and fauna either. Tourism affects all of the aspects of the region, especially the culture. Ecotourism has a cultural impact on local communities. Ecotourists are often partially motivated by the chance to experience local culture, which can have a positive and affirming effect on that culture. Involving local people in decision-making about tourism not only tends to allow them from a more positive attitude to the intrusive tourists, but also empowers them as a community. On the other hand, negative effects appear, such as the transformation of traditional cultural symbols and practices into commodities to sell and display to visitors, devaluing them, the disruption of the pre-existing relationships between local people and higher incidences of crime (Kennedy, 2017).

Crime becomes an issue because there is a new concept of monetary competition between locals, who are now competing for the almighty dollar instead of focusing on natural resources. People become greedy, now having new commodities they had lacked for years. These new products and commodities allow their greed to overcome their values and crime begins to rise in the communities. This is not the only issues that plague the community. Due to the rise in crime,

pre-existing relationships between local communities become frayed and worn. Communities that previously worked together and had long standing respect, now compete over the same tourist's dollar and have lost the bond of trust, which is now replaced by mistrust and greed.

The most ethical of the affects is the commercialization of traditional symbols and practices of the local people. Tourists want and expect the "full cultural experience" when they visit the Amazon, this includes visiting a "real Amazonian tribe." These people then devalue their culture to cater to the tourists who visit them. They parade around in full traditional dress, multiple times a day as if their culture is a circus performance. This act of constant humiliation takes all of the spirituality and tradition from the dances and rituals they are performing. The constant parading, and exhibiting can be compared to the comical portrayal of the old west in "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" that toured the US until the early 1900's (Fees, 2017). Often times sacred articles will be replicated and exploited to make a profit, much like a cheap souvenir shop does.

During the January trip, we were exposed to this cultural devaluation during our trip up the Rio Negro. We witnessed a local tribe perform three traditional dances and involve us in a fourth. A tribe elder explained about the importance and traditions behind the dances, yet they were exploited to profit through tourism. We were not the first to witness the dances that day, nor would we be the last to exploit the traditions of a native people. As we left, the locals allowed us to shop and purchase replica artifacts of their tribe and even allowed us to be painted in a ritualistic fashion. This is an ethical dilemma. These people's culture are being exploited each and every day, multiple times a day. Due to tourism demand, they have devalued their traditions and their symbols to a point they mean almost nothing. It leaves a very sour taste in

your mouth as you reflect on the experience, and wonder how it would feel if it was them exploiting our culture and traditions.

### Concluding Remarks

During a January trip to study international sustainability in Brazil, a class of fifteen students from Stockton, myself included, arrived in the Amazon. After months of studying the history, culture, environment, and other aspects of Brazil found ourselves in our own ethical dilemma. We had a general idea of the negative effects that tourism has on the entirety of the Amazon region, but we still chose to continue on the adventure. We hiked through the jungle, explored a cave, climbed sand stone outcroppings and toured the Rio Negro aboard a seventy foot yacht. Along with these adventures, we chose to feed capuchin monkeys, swam with the pink river dolphins, and even took part in a cultural ritual of a native tribe. At the time, we did not fully understand or acknowledge the effects of our actions and the damages that arise from these actions everyday. This is an example of very intelligent, environmentally conscious students, studying the natural resource sustainability of Brazil, facing an ethical dilemma and making a questionable decision.

This being said, tourism does have a place in the Amazon, and many people depend on the money that tourism, especially ecotourism, brings to their economy. Every aspect of their economy is positively impacted by tourism, not just the guide services. Hotels, restaurants, shops, attractions, all benefit from the influx of people, but it still comes at an environmental cost. Unfortunately the cost to the environment is overshadowed by the monetary value of the system, and slips further and further towards collapse. The allure of tourism is stronger than

imagined, and even some of the most environmentally conscious people are responsible for the impacts on the Amazon. It is easy to sit behind the computer screen booking an Amazon vacation, claiming it will be ecofriendly and leave no negative impacts, but until one's feet hit Amazonian soil, the impacts will never be known.

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