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Analyzing the Recent, Rapid Tourism Development in Panama's Bocas del Toro Archipelago: Is Socioenvironmental Justice Attainable?

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Analyzing the Recent, Rapid Tourism Development
in Panama's Bocas del Toro Archipelago:
Is Socioenvironmental Justice Attainable?

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A Research Paper

Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial
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Professor Cynthia Caron, Ph.D., Chief Instructor

Abstract

Analyzing the Recent, Rapid Tourism Development in Panama's Bocas del Toro
Archipelago: Is Socioenvironmental Justice Attainable?

Olivia Bourque

The Bocas del Toro archipelago of Panama has seen a rapid growth in its tourism industry since the 1990s. From a neoliberal perspective, tourism development is beneficial for all. Alternatively, I analyze the recent, rapid tourism development in Bocas from a critical development theoretical perspective, identifying its positive and negative implications, as well as who they accrue to. While there are economic benefits to tourism in Bocas, only foreign investors, the Panamanian government and English-speaking residents appear to earn them. The Bocas residents, and indigenous Ngöbe residents in particular, suffer from a range of economic, sociocultural, environmental and land access challenges stemming from tourism that exacerbate and create new forms of inequality. In order to achieve socioenvironmental justice in Bocas, a sustainable, community-based ecotourism alternative should be considered.

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1. Introduction

The Bocas del Toro archipelago of Panama consists of Caribbean islands and waters with rich biodiversity and an ethnically diverse human population. Following a relatively stagnant economy from the 1930s to the 1990s, a tourism industry began to form in Bocas as a result of political and economic shifts (Guerron-Montero 2011; Die 2012). The Panamanian government adopted neoliberal policies to promote foreign investment, resulting in the rapid development of Bocas del Toro as an exotic tropical tourist destination and the sudden influx of tourists to the archipelago (Die 2012). While tourism in Bocas has generated economic profit for a number of stakeholders, the true distribution of wealth and jobs, in addition to the unintended sociocultural, environmental and land access implications of tourism development, needs to be addressed. Tropical island systems such as Bocas del Toro are also home to fragile ecosystems and unique sociocultural customs. Conducting a detailed analysis of tourism development in such places allows failures to be avoided and successes to be applied elsewhere.

In this paper I provide a background on the study area, indigenous land use practices, local land tenure rights and the history of tourism in Panama, with an emphasis on changes in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. I then employ the analytical approach of Leach et al. (2012) to identify the economic, sociocultural, environmental, and land access implications of the recent rapid tourism development in Bocas. My main focus is to illuminate the ways in which tourism impacts the indigenous Ngöbe community. I also use a critical development theoretical perspective to debunk the dominant neoliberal narrative

that ‘any form of development is beneficial for everyone involved’ by identifying the stakeholders who benefit, as well as those who suffer, from rapid and often unsustainable tourism development (Die 2012). The last results section offers descriptions of two alternative forms of tourism. I then summarize the major conclusions of my research pertaining to vulnerable populations and the long-term costs of environmental degradation. Lastly, I recommend how the tourism sector of Bocas might be able to achieve socioenvironmental justice using the previously described alternative forms of tourism.

I utilized primary literature on previous research studies to conduct a secondary research approach and collect relevant information, which I then supplemented with participant observations that I made while residing in Bocas for three months. Through my analysis of that data, I aim to answer the following two research questions in this paper:

- I. How and for whom does the current form of traditional tourism planning and development create or exacerbate social inequalities and environmental issues within the Bocas del Toro archipelago?
- II. What sort of measures could be taken to reduce those inequalities and achieve socioenvironmental justice in Bocas?

2. Background

2.1 Study Area: Bocas del Toro Archipelago

Within the Bocas del Toro Province of Panama is the Bocas del Toro archipelago, which consists of a chain of approximately 68 islands and numerous mangrove keys in the

Caribbean Sea off the northwest coast of Panama (St. Louis & Doggett 2004). There are approximately 18,000 inhabitants distributed across nine of the archipelago's most prominent islands (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). While the archipelago was first inhabited by various indigenous groups, the largest indigenous group in Panama, the Ngöbe-Buglé, is the only one with a significant population remaining today (Controlaria General de Panama: Censo 2010; Die 2012). The rest of the population is made up of Afro-Antilleans, Chinese-Panamanians, Panamanian Latinos, and resident expatriates who are mostly from Europe and North America (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). Although all of these demographic groups are affected by the tourism industry in various ways, I will mainly be focusing on the impacts associated with the indigenous Ngöbe communities in this research paper.

Isla Colón, the largest island within the archipelago at 61 km², is home to over 50% of the archipelago's inhabitants and is the center of the Bocas del Toro tourism industry (St Louis & Doggett 2004; Controlaria General de Panama: Censo 2010; Die 2012). It is well developed compared to the other islands, with a small airport and water taxis available for transportation to and from the mainland (Sellier 2009). Bocas Town, located at the southern end of Isla Colón, is home to 78% of Colón residents and one of the most frequented tourist stops in Panama (Guerrón-Montero 2011; Die 2012). In 2008, there were 40 hotels, 28 restaurants, two travel agencies and nine tour operators in Bocas Town (Guerrón-Montero 2010). Ngöbe communities are well-established on Isla Colón, as well as Isla Bastimentos (51 km²), Isla San Cristobal (37 km²), Isla Solarté (8 km²) and a few

other Bocas islands (Sellier 2009). The traditional subsistence livelihood activities of the Ngöbe, including small-scale agriculture and fishing, have been supported for thousands of years by the archipelago's diverse set of tropical ecosystems (Guerrón-Montero 2010).

While tropical rainforests cover 65% of Bocas del Toro, the islands' coasts and surrounding waters are home to mangrove stands, coral reefs and seagrass beds (Guzman et al. 2005). In addition to contributing to the archipelago's rich biodiversity and wide array of flora and fauna, these ecosystems serve important ecological functions (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). For example, mangroves maintain coastal water quality, reduce coastal damage from storms and flooding, and provide critical habitat for a variety of benthic and pelagic marine animals (Benfield et al. 2005). Plus, the natural beauty of the rainforests and coral reefs within the archipelago is what ultimately makes Bocas del Toro an attractive destination for the tourism industry (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015).

2.2 Ngöbe Land Practices and Local Land Tenure Rights

Within the Bocas del Toro archipelago and other Ngöbe territories, indigenous customary land rights have long been determined in terms of invested time and labor. The first person to clear and cultivate a piece of land by planting on it earns the right, within the Ngöbe community, to continue using it for residential and agricultural purposes (Thampy 2013). This land is then inherited through descent lines, collectively owned by a particular kin group, and at times regulated by the senior resident male (ibid). The Ngöbe also share communal hunting, fishing and collecting territories (ibid). These resource use areas are

usually much larger than the areas devoted to agricultural use, and they often overlap (Herlihy 1997). Issues relating to land use and ownership first arose in Bocas when these indigenous land use practices and communal property system started being challenged by the national and local governments' definitions of land use practices and property rights.

Panama's constitution from 1972 required the establishment of *comarcas*, or recognized semi-autonomous indigenous territories, for all indigenous ethnic groups in the country (Plant & Hvalkof 2001). Years later, in 1997, Law No. 10 established a *comarca* for the Ngöbe-Buglé indigenous people in the northwestern region of Panama that legally granted the Ngöbe exclusive land rights there (Plant & Hvalkof 2001). However, despite the Ngöbe comprising more than 70% of the Bocas del Toro province's total population, this *comarca* does not fully extend into that province (Controlaria General de Panama: Censo 2010). As a result, the Bocas del Toro archipelago and many other regions heavily inhabited by Ngöbe people fall completely outside of this *comarca* and are therefore not currently defined by the Panamanian government as Ngöbe territory (Plant & Hvalkof 2001; Thampy 2013). As a result, indigenous customary land use practices are less commonly respected in the Bocas del Toro archipelago compared to in this *comarca*. Today, local government officials determine and statutory rights dominate the archipelago's landscape.

Five main ways to characterize land access include: (1) titles, (2) rights of possession, (3) rights of occupation, (4) concessions, and (5) informal tenure (Thampy 2013). Land titles confer private property rights, but no more land titles have been granted

on islands within the Bocas archipelago since 1941(Thampy 2013). However, titles granted before 1941 are still legally valid today. The right of possession signifies people's right to squat on municipal land as long as they are "improving" it through labor and investments (Thampy 2013). To prove one's right of possession, three neighbors must act as witnesses to one's proof of residence gained through planting crops and building new structures on the property (Thampy 2013).

Rights of occupation commonly act as agreements between government officials and people requesting permission to continue residing on mangrove colonies, which are technically municipal land (Thampy 2013). Mangrove colonies are formed by cutting down mangrove stands in the water and building small huts on the remaining swamp (Thampy 2013). Concessions are similar to rights of possession, but they can be granted for 90 year periods and the land they cover can be used as collateral for loans (Thampy 2013). Lastly, informal tenure arrangements are commonly administered by government officials in Bocas in the form of permission slips or verbal agreements to use a particular piece of land (Thampy 2013).

While the Ngöbe people's land use traditions and many of the local land tenure systems described above do not permit the buying, selling or exchanging of property for profit, alterations to this rule have been made by the Panamanian government in an attempt to stimulate local economic growth. Panama passed Law 2, the Island Law, in 2006, which gives concessions for tourism development projects more power by granting developers the right to treat leased land as if it is private property (Thampy 2013). Law 2 essentially

overlooks the fact that land titles are no longer allowed to be purchased on the Bocas islands by granting investors equivalent rights for up to 90 years. The Panamanian government also passed Law 80 in 2009, which aimed to grant titles for rights of possession that could then be regulated according to property size (Thampy 2013). Under Law 80, free titles are only issued for properties that are smaller than 5 hectares (Thampy 2013). Before discussing the impact of these laws on Bocas residents, they need to be understood in the greater context of Bocas' tourism development history and the rise of neoliberal political strategies in Panama.

2.3 History of Tourism Development in Bocas

Prior to tourism, the major industry in Bocas was banana production. The United Fruit Company (UFC) arrived to the archipelago in 1890, providing jobs for Afro-Antilleans and stimulating economic growth (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). However, disease devastated the archipelago's banana plantations in the 1920s, resulting in their abandonment by the UFC (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). From the 1930s to the 1990s, there was little economic activity in Bocas del Toro and residents mainly engaged in small-scale subsistence agriculture, fishing and hunting (Guerrón-Montero 2011). In the early 1990s, the archipelago became one of the most popular tourism destinations in Panama, stimulating economic growth in the area once again (Die 2012). Panama's political and legislative history can help explain this sudden boom in tourism in Bocas.

In 1989, the military dictator of Panama, Noriega, was overthrown with help from the United States military (Die 2012). A formal democracy based on neoliberal economic principles followed, with Guillermo Endara elected president. Under Endara's leadership, policies were formed that favored privatization and incentivized international business investments in Panama (Hughes & Quintero 2000). Endara helped pass legislation that reduced taxes paid by large multi-million dollar companies from 50% of their total revenue per year to 34% (Hughes & Quintero 2000). Ernesto Balladares, who was elected president in 1994, continued in Endara's footsteps by reducing the tax for rich corporations even further to 30% (Die 2012). In 1994, Balladares also instituted Law No. 8, the Tourism Law, which eliminated real estate property taxes for tourism development (Thampy 2013). Both Endara and Balladares declared tourism a national priority for Panama in the 1990s and used these types of policies to encourage foreign investment in the industry (Guerrón-Montero 2002; Die 2012).

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the global economy, and Panama has the fastest growing tourism sector in Central America (Cusack & Dion 2006; Sellier 2009). Balladares invested in the development of a Tourism Development Master Plan (TDMP) by the Tourism Authority of Panama (ATP) and the Organization of American States (OAS), which divided Panama into tourism zones and described a framework for tourism's future growth (Thampy 2013; Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015). The revised TDMP for the years 2007-2020 recognizes the Bocas del Toro archipelago as its own tourism zone and claims that investors will see a high return of

\$20.75 for every \$1 invested in tourism development (Panosso Netto & Godoi Trigo 2015; Die 2012). Pro-business president Ricardo Maritnelli, elected in 2009, reduced the corporate tax even further to 20% and created policies favoring businesses and promoting international investment (Die 2012). As a result of these politically-driven economic incentives for foreign investment, the tourism industry has rapidly developed in Bocas in recent years.

Large multinational tourism corporations have wealth and power that they can use to promote favorable business conditions for themselves in developing countries such as Panama. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) was created in 1995 in this vein. GATS states that foreign investors must be treated with equal preference as domestic investors and allows corporations to challenge countries' laws for being restrictive to trade (World Trade Organization 2012). As a result, GATS makes it difficult for host countries to promote local development or to form mandatory social or environmental regulations, allowing foreign investors to dominate developing nations' tourism sectors and the local economies that depend on them (Die 2012). Under Balladares, GATS was translated into Law 54, the Real Estate Law, which was formed in 1998 to grant foreign investors the same rights as domestic investors in Panama (Thampy 2013). Coupled with permissive tax policies and government-sponsored economic incentives, GATS has helped to draw large multinational tourism corporations and other foreign investors to Bocas.

In an attempt to facilitate involvement in the tourism sector by Ngöbe people and other Bocas residents, a small number of NGOs have been working to educate and support

them in sustainable tourism practices (Claiborne 2010). Some Bocas residents, including people from Ngöbe communities, have tried to start small-scale ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) operations, but only a few have had success. Rutilio Milton from the Bahia Honda Ngöbe community on Isla Bastimentos is one of those rare success stories. He was trained in environmental conservation by the National Environmental Authority of Panama (ANAM) and now runs a sustainable bat cave tour operation and restaurant (Claiborne 2013). But understanding the economic, sociocultural, environmental, and land access-related changes that have occurred due to rapid tourism growth in Bocas can help explain why indigenous Ngöbe communities and other residents have been put at a disadvantage when it comes to reaping the benefits of the industry.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Methodology

This project uses both secondary and primary data. In terms of conducting secondary research, the majority of the information consolidated in this research paper is derived from primary literature on the Bocas del Toro archipelago and the growth of the tourism industry in that region of Panama. I used this secondary research approach as a tool for deductive reasoning regarding the topics of Ngöbe land use practices, local land tenure systems, the history of neoliberal political strategies and tourism in Panama, the economic, sociocultural, environmental and land access implications of tourism in Bocas, and sustainable alternatives to traditional tourism development. I also collected primary

data through participant observation between February and May 2014 while I was living on Isla Solarte and traveling to other islands within the Bocas del Toro archipelago. While in the field, I also collected supplementary information on the environmental and sociocultural impacts of tourism by observing them first-hand in Bocas. This primary data allowed for an additional element of inductive reasoning in my analysis.

In this paper, I use Leach et al.'s framework as an analytical lens to analyze this data. I then present my own conclusions about which stakeholders in the Bocas tourism industry suffer and which ones benefit from its current methods and rate of growth (found in the Discussion section below). Additional ideas about long-term environmental consequences and ways to achieve socioenvironmental justice, presented in the Conclusions and Recommendations section, are also a result of this analytical process. The following section explains in more detail the theoretical perspective I used to conduct my analysis for this research paper.

3.2 Theoretical Perspective

Similar to the work of Leach et al. (2012) and Die (2012), I use a critical development theoretical perspective to critically assess the recent rapid development of the tourism industry in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. In doing so, I follow the same steps in the analytical framework used by Leach et al. (2012). Just as Leach et al. (2012) explored the implications of biochar production for resource-poor farmers in Africa and the ecologies they inhabit, I explore the economic, sociocultural, environmental, and land

access implications of tourism affecting resource-poor residents of indigenous Ngöbe communities in Bocas. Leach et al. (2012) also highlighted the ways in which the promise of grand benefits threatens to translate into the appropriation of land and resources, as well as the disciplining of farming practices in new and alienating ways. Similarly, I draw attention to the ways in which the promise of economic benefits in the form of an influx of wealth and jobs from the tourism sector threatens the subsistence activities and sociocultural traditions of indigenous Ngöbe communities.

The critical development theoretical perspective which Die (2012) explicitly used in her thesis offers a framework for analyzing the global tourism industry as a traditional form of development that operates within and according to a global capitalist, neoliberal system. The dominant narrative inherently associated with tourism development claims that all development projects are beneficial for everyone directly and indirectly involved in them (Fairhead & Leach 1995). Through a critical assessment of this dominant narrative and the assumptions associated with it, I produce a focused counter narrative that exposes the numerous economic, sociocultural, environmental and land access-related impacts of the recent tourism development in Bocas. Within this counter narrative I also identify who benefits and who suffers the most as a result. In doing so, I reveal some new and existing forms of inequality in Bocas.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Impacts of Tourism Development on Bocas and its Stakeholders

I found many impacts associated with tourism development within the Bocas del Toro archipelago. The main topics that I cover in the following sections are the economic inequalities, sociocultural impacts, environmental implications and land access issues experienced by different stakeholders since the tourism industry's boom. After I identify and analyze these impacts, I am able to accurately understand and explain how the costs and benefits of tourism development are distributed among its stakeholders.

4.1.1 Economic Inequalities

Tourism is generally regarded as a development strategy that results in economic growth, job creation and poverty reduction (Meyer 2010). But while wages and the exchange rate tend to rise in countries where their tourism industry grows, inflation on the prices of food and other goods is also common, often negating the benefits of a wage increase (Die 2012). This paradigm is occurring in the Bocas del Toro archipelago today as a result of the increased gasoline prices, growing tourism sector and influx of relatively wealthy tourists (Die 2012). The tourism industry has also created many jobs in Bocas. However, most of the more profitable, larger tourism-related businesses are foreign-owned as a result of the previously mentioned laws and government incentives for foreign investment (Die 2012). For example, GATS and Law 54 stifle the promotion of local tourism development, making it easy for foreign investors to dominate Bocas' tourism sector and the local economy that depends on it (World Trade Organization 2012; Thampy 2013). As a result, foreign investors are able to dominate the tourism sector and the local economy that depends on it. Plus, without government funding or programs to foster local

Panamanian businesses, it is difficult for Bocas residents to compete with foreign investors' businesses.

Most of the tourism sector jobs that are available to Bocas residents are low-paying and low-skilled jobs in construction, maintenance, housekeeping and other service areas (Die 2012). The exploitation of cheap labor is common in Bocas, with foreign employers frequently paying Ngöbe and other non-English speaking residents less than minimum wage (Die 2012). English speakers are more likely to get higher paying jobs as receptionists, diving instructors or party promoters since they are better able to interact with English-speaking tourists. Often these jobs are outsourced to foreigners and other non-residents who have come to Bocas looking for work. They are sometimes illegally employed and paid higher untaxed wages in cash (Die 2012). In addition to the struggle for non-English-speaking Bocas residents to find jobs with livable wages in the tourism industry, many job opportunities are seasonal. During the high season from November to March, there is less rain and more tourists, and therefore more available jobs than in the low season from May to October (Die 2012).

The World Bank identifies Panama as one of the fastest growing economies in the Western Hemisphere, with economic growth rates between 5 and 10% (World Bank 2012). However, usually less than 25% of the profits from tourism industries actually remain in the host country (Meletis & Campbell 2009). Multinational corporations and other foreign investors that dominate the tourism sector transfer the rest overseas. The small portion of wealth that does remain in Panama stays within the elite social and

economic classes. As a result, Panama's income inequality gap has continued to grow in conjunction with government efforts to push neoliberal policies and foreign investment in tourism development. In 2007, the richest 20% received 63% of the overall income of the country, while the poorest 20% received only 1.5% of Panama's income (Die 2012; Manduley and Feijóo 2009). Although there is an influx of wealth to Panama as a result of the tourism industry, the reliance of government authorities on foreign investors in the tourism sector is partially to blame for the uneven distribution of wealth across the country.

4.1.2 Sociocultural Impacts

As a result of the recent development of the tourism sector and influx of over 100,000 tourists visiting the Bocas del Toro archipelago every year, residents have begun to notice significant unanticipated sociocultural changes (Sellier 2009). According to older residents, the tourists are negatively influencing the youth of Bocas in terms of appearances, behavior and lifestyle activities (Claiborne 2010). Possibly the most significant behavioral change that has been influenced by tourism development is the increased use of drugs and alcohol by Bocas residents. Drug use was stigmatized and virtually nonexistent before the growth of the tourism industry in Bocas (Die 2012). But a demand by tourists for alcohol, cocaine and other drugs has contributed to the increased use of those products by locals in addition to the creation of a bar scene and drug market in Bocas (Die 2012). Selling drugs has become common among a number of Bocas residents since it is often a better paying and more consistent year-round job than those available in the tourism sector (Die 2012).

Increased crime and theft have also come with the tourism boom in Bocas (Claiborne 2010; Die 2012). Armed robberies have become more common and an increase in the number of bars on Isla Colón and Isla Bastimentos has correlated with a greater number of sexual assaults (Die 2012). I was told on multiple occasions to avoid traveling in those areas by myself at night to avoid getting robbed or assaulted. Alternatively, a potentially positive sociocultural change is the fact that Ngöbe and other Bocas residents are beginning to learn how to speak English in order to better interact with American tourists (Die 2012). Local schools now even teach English to young children, as speaking English is a valuable skill in Panama since it could potentially lead to jobs with higher wages (Die 2012). An emphasis on learning the English language could pose a sociocultural threat on Ngöbe communities through the eventual abandonment of their native language.

Another major sociocultural change occurring across many Ngöbe communities is the abandonment of subsistence livelihood activities, such as fishing and agriculture, in order to participate in the newly emerging economic markets related to tourism growth in Bocas. While this shift may be viewed positively by promoters of development within a capitalist system, the subsequent loss of indigenous traditions and knowledge should be considered. Additionally, this movement away from subsistence activities is partly caused by the degradation of natural resources initiated by unsustainable livelihood activities and tourism operations.

4.1.3 Environmental Implications

The Bocas tourism sector grew over 70% in the past decade, with unplanned tourism development putting a lot of pressure on the area's natural resources (Sellier 2009). Despite the goal of most ecotourism ventures in Bocas to showcase the natural beauty of the area, environmental degradation through tourism-related activities has started to become noticeable. For example, extensive boat traffic through environmentally sensitive areas, coupled with the damaging of coral reefs by anchors and inexperienced divers, has threatened those fragile ecosystems which take thousands of years to form (Die 2012). In addition to the degradation of coral reefs from unsustainable recreational activities, coastal development intended to support the tourism sector directly influences the destruction of coastal sections of rainforest and mangrove stands. With the increased frequency of these unsustainable practices occurring, the resiliency of coastal and marine ecosystems is being reduced (Guzman et al. 2005).

Improper disposal of waste by both residents and tourists has also taken a negative toll on Bocas' environment. Non-biodegradable trash is commonly littered on the islands' streets and thrown into the ocean, where it is often consumed by organisms, endangering species and disrupting food chains (Die 2012). While I observed the teaching of children and their families about littering and recycling through educational programs in schools, improvements in the basic waste-disposal infrastructure of Bocas are needed to initiate significant change in these practices. The only municipal waste service within the archipelago is a landfill on Isla Colón, where I witnessed all waste and unwanted

recyclable material being burned in a large pit. In other parts of Bocas, the dumping and backyard burning of trash are common waste disposal methods (Die 2012). Burning trash is hazardous because it initiates a heat-induced breakdown of that waste into its chemical components. The smoke that is released from burning plastic and other waste items often contains toxic chemicals, such as mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), dioxins and furans, which are harmful to humans and the environment (WCEF Fact Sheet). This toxic smoke travels through the air and contaminates water, resulting in the bioaccumulation of those pollutants in humans and other local species (WCEF Fact Sheet).

Additionally, sewage used to be pumped directly into the ocean through old sanitation infrastructure (Die 2012). During fieldwork, I noticed that places like Bocas Town on Isla Colón have more modern plumbing systems. However, the influx of large numbers of tourists in recent years threatens the integrity of that fragile infrastructure. I also observed many indigenous communities on islands less frequently visited by tourists continuing to dump human refuse directly into the coastal waters of Bocas' islands. Large amounts of this human waste have the potential to contaminate fragile coastal ecosystems and pollute the sea. Until sufficient recycling, trash and sanitation infrastructure is in place in Bocas, environmental degradation will likely continue to worsen as the tourism sector grows.

Despite the number of negative environmental impacts from unsustainable tourism development in Bocas, a few attempts to protect natural resources have been made. Some environmental regulations and conservation efforts have been formed in an effort to ensure

the possibility of continuing ecotourism efforts into the future (Claiborne 2013). For example, the Panamanian government declared an area around Isla Bastimentos a national marine park in 1988 (Die 2012). The formation of the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park was done in the name of conservation with the underlying intention of turning it into a major tourist attraction in Bocas (Guerron-Monterro 2005). Unfortunately, none of the indigenous Bocas residents or their subsistence livelihoods had been considered in the establishment of the marine park, which infringes on communal Ngöbe fishing territory. The main issue this entails is that fishing is prohibited within the park, thereby excluding indigenous peoples from one of their main livelihood activities.

4.1.4 Land Access Issues

As the previous section mentions, communal hunting, fishing and resource gathering territories that play a critical role in maintaining the subsistence-based livelihoods of the Ngöbe have the potential to be disrupted by the formation of national parks. Ngöbe communities in Bocas have also begun losing indigenous roaming rights to such territories due to land being frequently sold to investors and turned into private property in the name of tourism (Claiborne 2010). Aside from titling procedures that ended after 1941, the local land tenure systems in place in the Bocas archipelago do not allow land on islands to be legally owned, bought or sold. However, Laws 2 and 80, which were formed in the 2000s to encourage tourism development and generate revenue in Bocas, have recently begun allowing those land tenure systems to be reimagined using neoliberal principles.

Since Law 2 permits concessions on Bocas islands to be treated as privately titled land, investors in tourism development are able to gain private land tenure rights by paying titling taxes and fees (Mayhew & Jordan; Thampy 2013). Similarly, Law 80 allows rights of possession to be treated as titles to particular plots of land. Both of these laws succeed in stimulating economic growth by promoting foreign investment in Bocas' tourism industry and accelerating land alienation through the titling process (Thampy 2013). However, they result in many conflicting land claims and the frequent dispossession of indigenous Ngöbe and other vulnerable residents from their land (Mayhew & Jordan). For example, Law 80 only allows the Ngöbe and other impoverished residents to retain free rights of possession to state land that is less than 5 hectares in size, which is not a sufficient amount of land for hunting or subsistence agriculture (Thampy 2013). As a result, the best-case scenario for indigenous Bocas residents with the right to possess land is to build a residence on a small, unproductive plot of land (Thampy 2013).

Other issues surrounding land access within the Bocas del Toro archipelago since the beginning of the tourism industry's rapid growth pertain specifically to customary indigenous land use practices. For one, roaming rights to communal resource use territories among the Ngöbe communities in Bocas have never been recognized by the Panamanian government since the archipelago falls outside of the currently established Ngöbe-Buglé *comarca* (Plant & Hvalkof 2001; Thampy 2013). As a result, neoliberal land tenure policies only perceive agricultural, residence and income-generating uses of land, such as tourism development, as having value by showing proof of "improving" it (ibid). The land

speculation that has been created in Bocas as a result of tourism has also negatively impacted Ngöbe inheritance traditions in some cases (ibid). Despite Ngöbe residential and agricultural land being bilaterally possessed by entire families, or kin groups, some Ngöbe individuals have ignored their customary rules and sold their family's land to investors (ibid). Such land use practices have increased in frequency since the start of the Bocas tourism industry, displacing entire indigenous extended families and making accessing land for subsistence purposes almost entirely impossible (ibid).

Once displaced from island land that they have lived on and cultivated as a result of tourism-induced land conflicts, Ngöbe individuals and communities have been forced to find other ways to survive within the archipelago. Several have established mangrove colonies, which are common around Bocas Town on Isla Colón (Thampy 2013). While mangrove colonies provide space for people to live and easy access to marine resources, they do not possess productive land for growing crops and they lack the diversity of natural resources found in the islands' rainforests. Increasing the number of mangrove colonies also has negative environmental implications by supporting the removal of mangrove stands which play a critical role in marine ecosystems. In the end, the Panamanian government's desire to stimulate growth of the Bocas tourism industry and generate as much revenue from it as possible (coupled with conflicting land tenure regimes across the archipelago) has resulted in neoliberal land reforms that put poor Ngöbe residents at a disadvantage to wealthy foreign and Panamanian elites (Thampy 2013).

4.2 Stakeholder Analysis: Who Benefits? Who Suffers?

The previous analysis of several economic, sociocultural, environmental and land access-related impacts of tourism development in Bocas shows that their positive and negative implications are not distributed evenly among stakeholders. One of the most apparent disparities exists across the economic impacts of tourism. The players who benefit the most from the major influx of foreign capital into the Bocas tourism sector are the investors themselves and the Panamanian government. While the investors are guaranteed a generous return on their investments, the Panamanian government gains from their presence through tax benefits (Die 2012). Additionally, the social and economic Panamanian elite who can afford to run their own tourism operations benefit, as well as English-speaking Panamanians and foreigners who are able to find relatively well-paying jobs in Bocas. On the other hand, many of the permanent residents of Bocas, particularly the non-English-speaking indigenous peoples, have a difficult time making a living working in the tourism sector with few job opportunities, low wages, prominent labor exploitation and an increased cost of living in Bocas.

It is gradually becoming apparent that indigenous Bocas residents may also suffer from the noticeable loss of sociocultural traditions due to the influx and growing presence of foreign tourists. With a large number of Americans and Europeans visiting Bocas each year, the younger generations of Bocas residents have started to adopt their habits, abandoning the ways in which their ancestors lived and behaved. Increased drug dealing, substance abuse and instances of crime also have the most significant impact on the

residents compared to any other stakeholder group. While tourists may visit looking for drugs and nightlife during their vacation, residents are the ones who end up suffering from addiction and relying heavily on the drug economy as a source of income year-round.

As the degradation of natural resources in Bocas due to tourism continues, the stakeholders that suffer the most are the indigenous Ngöbe communities that still attempt to participate in subsistence livelihood activities such as fishing, relying heavily on healthy ecosystems for survival. If the fish populations are being depleted due to habitat destruction or overfishing to supply restaurants with seafood, there is simply not enough for local consumption. The exclusion of Ngöbe subsistence activities from national marine parks also threatens their indigenous sociocultural traditions. While indigenous residents suffer from the more immediate environmental impacts, other stakeholders who rely mainly on tourism to make a living will eventually suffer as well. If coastal development, the improper disposal of waste, and the destruction of critical ecosystems continue, Bocas' biodiversity and "pristine" beaches which draw tourists to its shores will deteriorate significantly. In order for ecotourism in Bocas to continue into the future, sustainable practices must be adopted.

The issues relating to land access and rights are intimately connected to the economic, sociocultural and environmental factors previously discussed. The neoliberal economic policies and land reforms in Panama, created mainly to stimulate tourism development, have turned land within the Bocas del Toro archipelago into a commodity that can be bought and sold on the global capitalist market (Thampy 2013). As a result, the

current land tenure regime in Bocas puts the Ngöbe and other poor Bocas residents at a major disadvantage. While wealthy foreign investors and Panamanian elites generally benefit from this switch by being able to purchase private property and invest in the promising tourism industry, most of the residents who lack monetary wealth can barely afford enough land to successfully live on. Plus, previously acknowledged rights associated with living and working on certain plots of municipal land that were once granted to indigenous and other residents have since been ignored in light of capital growth. Another previously mentioned cost to the Ngöbe is that they are being forced to abandon subsistence livelihood activities due to losing access to large plots of land and their natural resources. Many displaced Bocas residents are then forced to contribute to environmental degradation by forming and living on mangrove colonies.

4.3 Alternatives to Traditional Forms of Tourism

I have found two promising alternatives to traditional forms of tourism practiced and observed in places like Bocas. In an effort to lessen the negative environmental impacts of tourism development described in Section 4.1.3, sustainable ecotourism is a proposed solution. Lessening the burden on Bocas residents, and indigenous Ngöbe residents in particular, requires the tourism industry to become community-based. While there are some examples of both ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) in Bocas, they need to be at a much larger scale in order to have a significant positive impact on the local environment and community.

4.3.1 Sustainable Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a term that has been used all over the world to describe tourism operations that are dependent on the natural environment of a particular area (Orams 1995). Although there are positive connotations associated with the prefix ‘eco’, this definition says nothing about the environmental sensitivity of the tourism operation’s behavior. Loosely applied, ecotourism can refer to any form of tourism that relies on the environment without requiring any human responsibility to minimize damage to ecosystems or to protect natural resources (Orams 1995). In order to distinguish ecotourism from traditional forms of tourism, I argue that it should be renamed ‘sustainable ecotourism’ and redefined as such.

According to the U.S. EPA’s National Risk Management Research Laboratory, “sustainability occurs when we maintain or improve the material and social conditions for human health and the environment over time without exceeding the ecological capabilities that support them” (Sikdar 2003, p. 1928). Sustainable ecotourism, therefore, refers to a form of tourism that showcases the natural beauty of an area through the use of environmentally sound behavior. An example would be a snorkeling tour operation that educates tourists on how to not damage the coral reefs before entering the water and only dropping the boat anchor in sandy areas. Since tourists are less likely to know about the unique and fragile habitats of a tourist destination, education-based management strategies play an important role in sustainable ecotourism operations. As the previously explained example with Bocas resident Rutilio Milton showed, tour guides and operators also benefit

from formal educational training in environmental conservation. Overall, the stability and permanence sought by sustainability in the tourism industry relies on the resilience of both the social and ecological systems at play (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2011).

4.3.2 Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

As the previous section explains, sustainable ecotourism relies heavily on social systems and community-based efforts in order to protect the environment. When applied effectively, community-based tourism (CBT) follows many of the same methods used by sustainable ecotourism operations. While CBT's specific focus is on maintaining the sociocultural traditions of communities while improving their living conditions, the overarching goal is to achieve a sustainable level of development in doing so (Ruiz-Ballesteros 2011). According to Hiwasaki (2006), the aims of CBT are "communities' empowerment and ownership, conservation of natural and cultural resources, social and economic development, and quality visitor experience" (p. 677). In order to attain these ambitious goals in Panama, local communities and domestic resources must be appropriately utilized and protected.

4.3.3 Potential Application in Bocas

In order to successfully implement sustainable, community-based ecotourism operations in the Bocas del Toro archipelago, the Panamanian government first needs to make domestic investors committed to sustainability and community-involvement a priority. As the previous section on the economic issues associated with tourism in

developing countries illustrates, foreign investors seek economic profit with little to no regard for the local communities and environment. Once Panamanian politicians are convinced that more wealth accumulated from the tourism industry will remain within the country if managers and investors are domestic residents, they may reconsider the national policies encouraging foreign investments. If this switch is supported, sustainable, community-based tourism operations can be provisioned at a greater scale within Bocas.

Implementation of sustainable ecotourism operations requires tour operators and guides to be well-educated on the local species and ecosystems and their importance as part of the greater island system of Bocas. Since Bocas residents live among the archipelago's ecosystems, they are likely to already know more about them than newcomers to the area. If not, I expect they will at least be willing to learn how to run a successful ecotourism operation and become certified environmental conservation by organizations such as ANAM. When I met Rutilio Milton and went on his boat ride and cave tour on Isla Bastimentos, he conveyed his love for and extensive knowledge of the archipelago's rich biodiversity. He also explained how proud he was to be dedicating his livelihood to preserving that local biodiversity while simultaneously educating both residents and tourists about its importance. Based on their long history of relying on subsistence livelihood activities and overall interdependence on the natural Bocas environment, I suggest that Ngöbe residents have the greatest potential to succeed as community-based, sustainable ecotourism operators within the archipelago.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Through this project, I have identified indigenous Bocas residents as the population most vulnerable to current forms of tourism development within the archipelago. The long term costs of tourism development associated with environmental degradation can no longer be ignored since the tourism industry relies on healthy tropical ecosystems to draw tourists to the area. In order to address these two overarching issues and achieve socioenvironmental justice in Bocas' tourism industry, I recommend that it adopts sustainable, community-based ecotourism practices.

5.1 Vulnerable Populations

While tourism development is not inherently destructive, its roots in our global capitalist system cause it to perpetuate and create new forms of inequality in developing areas such as the Bocas del Toro archipelago. Bocas' growing income inequality gap and high poverty rate of 50% in recent years can be attributed to the uneven distribution of wealth and jobs among stakeholders in the tourism industry (Nadal 2009: 10A). Even Panama's tourism and land access policies prioritize foreign investment over local communities and indigenous rights.

The most vulnerable stakeholders to the costs of tourism in Bocas are those who live there year-round, heavily rely on access to land and natural resources, and do not speak English. Many indigenous Ngöbe residents of Bocas fall into this category. Disputes over local land tenure systems put indigenous Ngöbe residents at a disadvantage at a time

when access to island plots in Bocas is a major commodity. Indigenous populations are also disproportionately affected by labor exploitation, sociocultural changes and environmental degradation. As the Ngöbe lose access to terrestrial and marine resources due to land rights issues and development-related damage to ecosystems, adhering to a subsistence lifestyle becomes a less viable option.

5.2 Environmental Degradation: Long Term Costs

The current tourism development in the Bocas del Toro archipelago is unsustainable. Most tourists visit Bocas' islands and marine habitats to see the products of unique tropical ecosystems, but often unintentionally damage them in the process through harmful recreational activities. With the increased frequency of coastal development and these other unsustainable practices occurring, the resiliency of critical coastal and marine ecosystems, such as mangroves and coral reefs, is being reduced (Guzman et al. 2005). Once they get to critical levels, important species will become endangered and entire food chains will be destabilized. Bocas also lacks the adequate waste disposal and plumbing infrastructure needed to keep up with a rapidly growing tourism industry and population (Die 2012). Air, water and terrestrial pollution are already becoming a human and ecosystem health problem that will likely only get worse if tourism development continues to spread across the archipelago without the improvement of existing infrastructure first. If these threats to Bocas' ecosystems are allowed to continue, both the tourism industry and extractive industries, such as fishing, will eventually stop being cost effective.

5.3 Achieving Socioenvironmental Justice in Bocas' Tourism Industry

Since tourism forms a major part of the local economy in the Bocas del Toro archipelago, more sustainable alternatives to traditional forms of tourism should be considered to allow its continuation into the future. Unfortunately, foreign investors dominate the Bocas tourism industry today, leaving Bocas residents to deal with the economic, sociocultural, environmental and land access-related costs. Putting tourism into the hands of indigenous and other residents, in the form of community-based tourism, would support domestic economic growth while closing the income inequality gap in Panama and preserving local sociocultural traditions. From these community-based tourism operations would naturally stem key elements of sustainable ecotourism, such as environmental education and natural resource protection. Adopting this type of sustainable, community-based ecotourism in Bocas would ensure that tourism can persist while reducing the inequalities exacerbated by traditional tourism based on neoliberal policies and in turn transitioning towards achieving socioenvironmental justice in Bocas.

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