

STORIES OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Preface

Every summer I return to my hometown, a rural community in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in New York State, to visit my family. At that time of year, my mother is most often found somewhere between her garden and the kitchen, harvesting the year's crop and preparing it for winter. Empty canning jars line the counters and sometimes even the floors, waiting to be filled with dilly beans, sauerkraut, and her homemade pasta sauce. The house is temporarily transformed into a kind of culinary sense experience by the smell of fresh tomatoes and herbs stewing on the stove, the crunch of cucumbers just plucked from the garden, and the sound of jar tops popping as they seal in the flavors of summer.

After attending my second residency for the Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program in the summer of 2011, I made my usual visit to New York. I stood in my mother's kitchen, snacking on crispy green beans while she pulled steaming jars of perfect pickles from a pot of boiling water. She asked me about school and then quickly confessed with a chuckle that, after a full year in the program, she still had no idea what it was I was studying. Admittedly, I was surprised and slightly insulted. And had to wonder: If my own mother has no idea what Cultural Sustainability is, does anyone? And if not, why not?

Watching my mother moving between the fresh vegetables still in the sink, the pots on the stove, and the rows upon rows of garden goodness now safely stored in jars, I was certain she understood sustainability; she just didn't call it that. For almost as long as I can remember, my mother has canned vegetables from the garden and frozen fruits

from local farms and orchards. Our shelves were always stocked with sauces, jams, and several types of pickles. The refrigerator was filled with eggs, fresh from the chickens that roamed freely outside. The freezers were often overflowing with meat from the cattle and pigs raised in our yard and venison from the deer my stepfather hunted in the fall. Although we recognized that the food tasted better than anything from a box, not once do I recall hearing the words “organic” or “sustainable” in our house. This is not to say that the health of our family and the environment were not factors in the decisions my mother and stepfather made – they prefer to know exactly what goes on and in our food, have never been keen on chemicals, use cow manure for natural fertilizer, spread saw dust in the garden to deter weeds and lock in moisture, and let the chickens and guinea fowl keep pest populations at bay. But it is to say current sustainability-related trends and terminology that have become common, even exploited, in media and marketing weren’t - and still aren’t - spoken in their house.

My mother wasn’t part of some trend of DIY¹ home gardening and my stepfather wasn’t necessarily concerned with “free range” eggs and beef; they were doing what they could to ensure there was enough food on the table. With up to six children living in our house at any given moment, the gardening, canning, butchering, and freezing were first and foremost out of necessity.

I realized that summer day in my mother’s kitchen that the disconnect was not only between she with her experience and I with my graduate school textbooks; there was a larger divide between the people talking, studying, and writing about sustainability and

¹ DIY (Do It Yourself) projects have become increasingly popular and are widely shared on social media sites like Pinterest. At the time my mother first planted our garden, we did not even have Internet at our house and certainly weren’t aware of any trends in sustainability.

those that have long been living it – whether out of necessity, knowledge, or both.

I wondered how we might begin to build a bridge, connect the concepts and people, exchange ideas, and share strategies that could bring us all closer to not just understanding sustainability, but living it.

This project is an effort to contribute to the construction of that bridge. And it is dedicated to my mother, who taught me about sustainability without ever uttering the word.

Introduction

Sustainability is about addressing needs; we have an obligation to develop, (re)learn, apply, and share strategies that help us meet our needs, maintain and endure – ideally, thrive - without exhausting resources or inflicting damage. We, people and planet, are in a grave place of necessity. I believe some of the solutions are in the principles and practices of environmental and cultural sustainability. And they should be shared.

If you have read a newspaper, a magazine, or had access to the Internet in the past five years, it is pretty probable you have seen sustainability-related terms like “green,” “eco,” and “organic” cropping up, particularly in marketing and advertising and often where they don’t belong. In the food industry, a lack of strict regulations on the use of the word “natural” has made it possible for producers to freely slap the label on their products regardless of the amount of natural ingredients they contain, deliberately taking advantage of the growing number of health conscious consumers and the extra money many are willing to pay for “natural” products². According to an American Bar Association *Business Law Today* article, surveys have found that “consumers express a preference for products labeled as ‘natural’ over those labeled as ‘organic,’” thus compounding its misuse³. In other industries, such as tourism, many businesses are also using the language of sustainability to attract customers, but not all are delivering on their

² While the use of the term “organic” is regulated by a strict set of requirements by the USDA, use of the label “natural” is not.

³ Ricardo Carvajal and Riëtte van Laack, “Seeing Red Over ‘Green’: The Fight Over ‘Organic,’ ‘Natural,’ and ‘Sustainable,’” *Business Law Today*, Volume 18, Number 5 May/June 2009, accessed December 23, 2012, <http://apps.americanbar.org/buslaw/blt/2009-05-06/carvajal.shtml>.

supposed earth-conscious promises. Some, like luxury Hotel RIU, make the claim, “We care about the environment” and issue press releases announcing green practices⁴. Yet, this same hotel has recently been accused of committing anti-environmental acts in Costa Rica, such as diverting a creek, removing sections of forest, and burying a section of mangrove in protected zones, all in the name of their allegedly eco-friendly hotel⁵. The exploitation of eco-terminology in cases where the primary motivation is boosting profit - not protecting the planet - is called “greenwashing.” This deceptive practice is increasingly common in Costa Rica, a popular ecotourism destination. The misappropriation of well-intentioned terms not only distorts their true meaning, it makes it more difficult for travelers to discern which options are actually eco-friendly, and does a disservice to both the country - that does, in fact, have incredibly rich culture and biodiversity - and to those who *are* dedicated to sustainable living and are using the terms to educate, not manipulate. Two of the chapters that follow highlight the efforts of two planet-friendly projects in which the creators and participants are actively working to create sustainable communities in their region of Costa Rica. They are not painting over socially and environmentally destructive practices with a shade of green jargon in an effort to increase tourism; they are studying and employing sustainable practices and sharing their knowledge with locals and visitors, for the benefit of all.

Although its current popularity might have some believing it is an innovative approach, the concept of sustainability is not new; the exploitation of it is. The idea itself

⁴ RIU Hotels and Resorts, accessed online January 4, 2013, http://www.riu.com/en/acerca_de_RIU/medio_ambiente/index.jsp.

⁵ “Hotel Chain and Bungee Jump Provider Accused of Greenwashing in Costa Rica,” *Costa Rica Star*, accessed online, January 4, 2013, <http://news.co.cr/hotel-chain-bungee-jump-provider-accused-greenwashing-costa-rica/5716/>.

is arguably as old as human existence. It is, as Ulrich Grober states, “neither an abstract theory dreamt up by modern technocrats nor a wild fantasy hatched by Woodstock-generation eco-freaks. It is our earliest, our primordial world cultural heritage.”⁶ But the overuse and misuse of these terms has muddied the waters of their meaning, detracting from their purpose and weakening their significance. As buzzwords, they have become so prevalent that *Advertising Age* listed “sustainability” as one of 2010’s top ten words “We Wish You’d Stop Saying,” explaining that it is “A good concept gone bad by mis- and overuse.”⁷ Given the gross abuse of the term and related lingo, I have to agree.

*So how do we reclaim the “good concept” and restore some of its legitimacy?
How do we bridge the gap between the people talking about sustainability and the people
living sustainably? How can we share strategies in a way that is beneficial to all?*

The issue of sustainability - or rather, the failure to address the cultural and environmental consequences of not living more sustainably - is not as distant as an Antarctic ice cap⁸. And the loss is not purely an environmental problem, nor is it restricted to a particular region; there is an eco-cultural crisis and it is global. In 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the UN recognized this crisis and created Agenda 21, an action plan intended to establish guiding principles for addressing issues of sustainability on a local,

⁶ Ulrich Grober, *Sustainability: A Cultural History*, translated by Ray Cunningham (Green Books, 2012), prologue.

⁷ “Book of Tens: Jargoniest Jargon We’ve Heard All Year,” *Advertising Age*, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://adage.com/article/special-report-the-book-of-tens-2010/advertising-s-jargoniest-jargon/147583/>

⁸ Research has shown that due to global climate change, Antarctic ice is melting at accelerated rates. David Shukman, “Sea-level rise from polar ice melt finally quantified,” BBC News, accessed December 23, 2012.

national, and global scale⁹. Although nearly 200 governments around the world adopted Agenda 21, destruction of lands, cultures, and communities continues. We still have a long way to go to achieve a more widespread understanding of the significance of sustainability and the necessity for action. In Honduras, 86% of lands belonging to the indigenous Garifuna people have been taken by non-Garifuna¹⁰. The most recent seizures of land have been carried out illegally, for use by giant monoculture¹¹ palm oil plantations, forcing Garifuna people off their legally titled lands. In their struggle to reclaim these, already 65 Garifuna small-scale farmers have been killed¹². Indigenous people in other countries, including Cameroon, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mexico, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines, face similar threats as their lands are seized and rainforests are destroyed – consequently displacing them, their culture, and ways of life - in the name of large-scale agrobusiness, mining, and unsustainable

⁹ Agenda 21, United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, accessed online December 24, 2012, <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&nr=23&type=400&menu=35>.

¹⁰ Tim Russo, with Research by Genevieve Roudane and COMPPA, “Vallecito Resists, Satuye Lives! The Garifuna Resistance to Honduras’ Charter Cities,” Upside Down World, September 2012, accessed December 23, 2012, <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/honduras-archives-46/3869-vallecito-resists-satuye-lives-the-garifuna-resistance-to-honduras-charter-cities>.

¹¹ Monoculture is an agricultural practice of cultivating a single crop on a large scale, typically over several consecutive years. As monoculture generally requires large tracts of land and the use of agrochemicals, it often poses significant problems to people and planet, including displacement of local people, toxic working conditions, low wages, and water and soil contamination.

¹² “Honduras: Stand with the Garifuna People as They Recover Ancestral Lands,” Cultural Survival, accessed December 23, 2012, <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/take-action/honduras-stand-garifuna-people-they-recover-ancestral-lands/honduras-stand-garifuna-0>

“development.”¹³ And these are just a few of the countless cases. In Chapter One, you will learn about another case, the impact of land loss on the Tsáchila people of Ecuador, and one Tsáchila community’s efforts to regain some of what has been lost. In Chapters Two and Three, some of the long-term consequences of monoculture cultivation in Costa Rica will be presented, in contrast to the sustainable solutions these two eco-community projects are exploring. The harmful effects of decisions that prioritize profit over priceless cultures, lifeways, and ecosystems are far-reaching. It follows, then, that to prevent and combat these crises, a broader awareness and discussion of the strategies of sustainability is necessary. The dialogue must be expanded - beyond those studying, researching, politicizing, and debating sustainability - to include more of the voices of those actually living it.

In the following chapters, you will read three stories of environmental and cultural sustainability in practice, learn about three community projects, and get a glimpse into the lives of the folks that created them. These are not people that have had the luxury of leveraging mass amounts of wealth or some sort of celebrity status. They are ordinary people that saw a need and are putting their passion and resources to work in sustainable ways, protecting the lands they love and perpetuating the cultures and communities they care about.

Fieldwork sites chosen for this project were Comuna El Poste, Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat (CRER), and Finca Organica el Paraiso. These sites were selected based on the following criteria:

¹³ “Global Response Campaign Alerts,” Cultural Survival, accessed December 23, 2012, <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/take-action>.

- They are actively responding to challenges and threats to sustaining culture, environment, and/or community.
- Their approaches include efforts of both cultural and environmental sustainability.
- They are everyday heroes that are drawing upon their passions, concerns, ingenuity, local communities, and the resources and assets already present to create solutions.

While each of the projects demonstrates significant successes and illuminates approaches that work, the people involved also wrestle with considerable challenges.

With a largely undocumented and nomadic history and only recent adaptation to a stationary communal lifestyle, the Tsáchila community of Comuna El Poste, Ecuador struggles to define what it means to be Tsáchila in a modern world. How do people continue their traditional practices if the very forests they hunted, fished, and farmed are taken? How does a chiefly family-centric culture begin to work as a community? Is it possible? And if so, what are the sacrifices? What is lost? Can something of value be gained? Don José, the cultural leader and shaman of El Poste carries the weight of a responsibility to his ancestors *and* present and future generations, as he works to guide the community in answering these questions and finding a balance between tradition and development.

Meghan Casey and Davis Azofeifa, owners of Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat and advocates of small-scale, sustainable agriculture, work to reverse environmental destruction and community upheaval in a region of Costa Rica all but overrun by non-organic, chemical-heavy banana and pineapple plantations. While innumerable

businesses in Costa Rica use shortsighted shortcuts, such as “greenwashing,” to increase business at the expense of people and planet, Meghan and Davis have dedicated themselves to learning, developing, using, and sharing holistic, sustainable practices and activities that protect the environment and benefit their community.

Daniel, owner of Finca Organica el Paraiso, Costa Rica and one of CRER’s community partners, spent much of his life working on non-organic banana plantations. The repeated exposure to agrochemicals caused Daniel’s health to suffer. Now, with the establishment of his own organic, family-run farm and an agro-tourism project, he is able to use and teach sustainable, chemical free techniques to local farmers and visitors. His success has increased awareness of sustainable agriculture in El Paraiso and brought economic and cultural benefits to the community. But not everyone is pleased. Despite his honest dedication to environmentally friendly practices and the generosity and care he shows his community, Daniel has had to endure tormenting at the hands of those in the area opposed to organic agriculture.

But, as environmentalist, entrepreneur, and best-selling author Paul Hawken declares, “Inspiration is not garnered from the recitation of what is flawed; it resides, rather, in humanity’s willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover, reimagine, and reconsider.”¹⁴ The following chapters do not dwell on the negatives, but rather, focus on celebrating the successes of Comuna El Poste, CRER, and Finca Organica. By offering examples of sustainability in practice, recognizing their efforts, sharing their strategies, and inspiring others to compassion - and ideally, action - these people and their stories breathe life into the term “sustainability” and expand the discussion of what is

¹⁴ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty in the World*, 4.

possible.

My work has been guided largely by the knowledge that efforts of cultural and environmental sustainability are key to community and economic health and growth. In other words, eco-conscious, asset-based economies can fuel holistic wellbeing for a community and its people.

It builds primarily on the work of Craig Dreeszen, in particular, his report on “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship, and Sustainable Development,” John P. Kretzmann and John L. McMcKnight’s theory of “asset-based community development,” and Jon Hawkes’s “The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability.” The findings of my fieldwork lend support to these and confirm that the following four principles are critical to building sustainable communities.

The sustainability and wellbeing of a community requires a holistic approach that takes into account environmental responsibility, social justice, economic viability, and cultural vitality (Hawkes, 2001). These four “pillars” of sustainability are interrelated, and as such, the overall health of a community relies on the strength and consideration of these, particularly when policies and initiatives are created. If one pillar is prioritized over the others, an imbalance is likely to result and overall sustainability is at risk. For example, when emphasis is placed on pursuing an economic opportunity - such as large scale, monoculture plantation production - with little or no regard for environmental responsibility, social equity, and cultural vitality, it is quite probable that the latter three will suffer (Vandermeer and Perfecto, 2005). In contrast, when a community or project takes a more holistic approach, as you will see in the three chapters that follow, the results and benefits can contribute positively to the overall

wellbeing of a community.

Communities can harness local assets to build strength and stimulate the economy (Eames, 2007; Adamson et al, 2003; Dreeszen, 2003; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Asset-based community development focuses on harnessing the strengths the community already possesses - rather than dwelling on deficiencies – and relies on cultural energy and relationships (existing and developed) within the community to mobilize these assets toward community-determined goals. Local assets include cultural and social capital, such as the cultural traditions, talents, skills and associations of community members, as well as environmental resources. Activities that stimulate “cultural energy”¹⁵ can help renew, instill, and sustain community pride (Dreeszen, 2003; Kleymeyer, 1994). Discussion and decisions regarding development should take into account and be led by local voices (Adamson et al, 2003; Dreeszen, 2003; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). To this end, collaboration within a community is one of the keys to success (Dreeszen, 2003, Walker et al, 2003; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). You will see how Don José, Meghan, Davis, and Daniel all recognize and utilize existing assets and nurture relationships that serve their communities.

Communities interested in establishing cultural and heritage tourism must consider both the benefits and risks (Chambers, 2009; Gmelch, 2009). Risks include

¹⁵ “Cultural energy” is a term coined by Charles David Kleymeyer that builds on Albert O. Hirschman’s concept of “social energy.” According to Kleymeyer, cultural energy “provides the collective force necessary to begin and sustain group action...it is also the force that enables a culture to renew itself. One could even say that a culture is alive to the extent that cultural energy is generated and maintained.” Kleymeyer, *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 31-32.

economic dependence on tourism¹⁶ and alteration of local customs and environment. In the documentary, *Milking the Rhino*, the ecotourism project by which a Maasai community set aside 80% of their pastureland for conservation was described as a “gamble” due to the incredible risk involved, the valid concern “What if we get a drought in tourism?” is raised, and a discussion about a shift in customs to accommodate tourists is had¹⁷. Tourism should be planned on a scale and with respect to local customs and people (Guyette, 2011; Dreeszen, 2003). When done in this manner, tourism can also serve as a tool of sustainability, stimulating the economy and fostering a sense of stewardship of local cultural and environmental assets (Guyette, 2011, Dreeszen, 2003). All three community projects (El Poste, CRER, and Finca Organica) have had to weigh the benefits and risks of tourism, and continue to face the challenge of finding a balance between conservation and development.

Training and education are important factors that can contribute to the sustainability of creative economies (Guyette, 2011; Dreeszen, 2003). Incorporating traditional arts training and other skills training, such as entrepreneurial skills, allows for these to be honed and information – new and traditional - to be passed on (Dreeszen, 2003). Don José, Meghan, Davis, and Daniel’s openness to training *and* willingness to share their knowledge has been one of the keys successes they’ve achieved in their respective projects.

¹⁶ Guha Shankar also alludes to this in a discussion of the Maasai, more specifically, the ecotourism project they invested in. “From subject to producer: reframing the indigenous heritage through cultural documentation training.” *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, Volume 5 (2010): 22.

¹⁷ *Milking the Rhino*, DVD, directed by David E. Simpson, Kartemquin Films, 2009.

I aim to amplify the voices of Don José, Meghan, Davis, and Daniel by sharing their stories as they so generously shared them with me. I have tried to do so in a way that allows them to speak. In *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, Charles David Kleymeyer recalls a note he saw attached to a tape received at a Lima radio program he was visiting¹⁸. At that time, it was common for radio programs to add their own moral to the broadcasts of folktales submitted by peasants. The peasant who sent this particular tape had a very specific request for the radio staff: “*No me cambias mi voz!*”/Don’t change my voice!” He wanted his folktale to be told as he had prepared it, “unadulterated by cultural intermediaries.”¹⁹

In an effort to stay true to the voices of the stories that follow, direct quotes in the language of the interview are given in italics, immediately followed by translations into English, where necessary. Although some specific questions were prepared, interviews were conducted more as casual conversations than in a strict question and answer style. All were encouraged to share their stories, struggles, and successes as they experienced them.

¹⁸ Kleymeyer, *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 23-24.

¹⁹ Ibid, 24.

Chapter One: Comuna El Poste

El Poste, Ecuador



Don José's wife, Wanpa, seen here wearing a Tsáchila style wrap skirt, prepares fish in the kitchen at the cultural center in El Poste.

El Poste, one of the seven remaining Tsáchila *comunas*²⁰ located in the lowlands southwest of Santo Domingo, has not always been home to the Tsáchila. In fact, until around the 19th century, the full expanse of the rainforests of northwest Ecuador – from the Esmeraldas River in the north down to the Andean highlands in the west, and Babahoyo in the south – may have been considered home to these previously semi-nomadic people.



The area highlighted in brown is the approximate area in which Tsáchila were believed to have lived and roamed previously as nomads. The red star near Santo Domingo indicates the only region of present day Tsáchila comunas. The star is not to scale, as the limited area of the comunas is actually too small to appear on the map²¹.

²⁰ communes; villages

²¹ Original map accessed online, January 1, 2013, <http://myweb.unomaha.edu/~mschweitzer/geog3000/Ecuador/p1map.jpg>. Brown highlighted area and red star added by author to illustrate Tsáchila territory.

Their traditional way of life – that relied on access to broad expanses of forest and was based largely in subsistence hunting, gathering, and fishing – was radically altered by the changes brought about by the colonial era and the land grabs and land laws that followed. The Tsáchila lands and population have decreased dramatically in the last 200 years²², and those remaining face the challenge of defining what it means to be Tsáchila in a modern world.

Don José, the cultural leader and shaman of El Poste, navigates these two worlds every day, as he works to strike a balance for himself and his community *and* foster a space for cultural energy, sustainability, and exchange.

²² Given the extremely limited documentation of Tsáchila history and the fact that the State has only recently made efforts to more accurately include indigenous people in the national census, population counts are not exact. According to Montserrat Ventura i Oller, it is estimated that there were approximately 30,000 semi-nomadic Tsáchila in the rainforests of northwest Ecuador at the start of the colonial era; today, their numbers have decreased to just over 2,000. “The Tsachila Indigenous People,” accessed online December 17, 2012, http://www.flacsoandes.org/archivo_lenguas/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3Atsachilas&catid=39%3Ablog&Itemid=107&lang=en.



Don José stands with a 200-year-old tree in El Poste that is believed to have good energy. The tradition is to touch and/or hug the tree to attract some of the good energy that it gets from the sun. Don José is seen here wearing a Tsáchila style wrap skirt that he wears daily. His hair is shaved on the sides, shaped, and painted with achiote paste. It is topped with a cotton crown, worn by Tsáchila men in a community that are considered senior and/or to hold power.

A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY, AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY

To understand some of the challenges that Don José faces today, it is important to consider the history of the Tsáchila. It is equally important to realize that historical records are limited and in most cases, too general to account for the Tsáchila's internal diversity²³. Interestingly, this internal diversity stems, in part, from the broader traditions that they shared as a people.

“Nuestros abuelos nos cuentan que los Tsáchila eran nómadas/Our grandparents tell us that the Tsáchila were nomads,” Don José explains. *“Ellos solamente vivían de cacería y pesca...ellos iban de un lugar a otro/they lived by (from) hunting and fishing...they went from one place to another.”*

Due to this traveling lifestyle, Tsáchila did not establish fixed towns. Rather, they grouped themselves by extended family units that typically included *pone*²⁴, and made their homes throughout the forest, where they found abundant resources. The forests and rivers around them provided most of what they needed to survive, including fish, game, fruits, and medicinal plants. Some Tsáchila also grew crops using slash and burn techniques²⁵, to supplement the foods they hunted and gathered. The family members

²³ Montserrat Ventura i Oller, “The Tsachila Indigenous People,” accessed online December 17, 2012, http://www.flacsoandes.org/archivo_lenguas/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3Atsachilas&catid=39%3Ablog&Itemid=107&lang=en and “Several representations, internal diversity, one singular people,” 61-67.

²⁴ “Pone,” meaning “shaman,” is a word from Tsafiki, the Tsáchila language.

²⁵ “Slash and burn” is an agricultural practice that involves clearing plots of forest, burning the vegetation, and using the ashes to fertilize the soil in which the crops are to be planted. This technique has been used by subsistence farmers and nomadic peoples in areas where dense vegetation and/or poor soil quality is not conducive to farming. Although this technique has been used for over 10,000 years, it is a point of concern from an environmental perspective; if it is overused and not properly planned, it can lead to deforestation, erosion, and loss of biodiversity.

shared the responsibilities, with activities loosely assigned by gender²⁶. Men were typically responsible for hunting as well as burning and clearing of fields, while women sowed the fields, prepared meals, and tended to other household duties. Handicrafts, such as clay pottery, basketwork, and textiles, were generally practiced by women, with men occasionally participated to the extent of making baskets and fishing nets.



Colorful threads used in Tsáchila textiles

Some Tsáchila developed trade with other highland and coastal groups, selectively incorporating products, such as colored threads to make the women's wrap skirts²⁷, and pieces of culture, like the marimba²⁸, into their own. But it was customary –

²⁶ These were not strict rules, but are the roles generally assigned.

²⁷ Previous to trade with Quito, the skirts were made of unbleached threads.

and, given the size of the rainforest, generally possible - to avoid confrontation and conflict. Family units tended to come together with others only for scheduled celebrations. Given the nuclear family-centric focus, nomadic lifestyle, and varied levels of interaction with outside groups, a pluralistic culture within the larger Tsáchila population naturally developed.

THE SPANISH INVASION AND INCREASED INTERACTION

Their wandering way of life and lack of a centralized government served the Tsáchila well in the early days of colonialism. Although the Spaniards began invading Ecuador in 1532, they found the rainforest impenetrable. As such, their contact with the Tsáchila was limited. The Tsáchila's intimate knowledge of the jungle and nomadic, non-confrontational nature helped them avoid being colonized by the Conquistadores.

But they did not escape the colonial era completely unscathed. With the Spanish invasion came foreign diseases.

“La viruela y la fiebre amarilla/Smallpox and yellow fever,” Don José says, recalling the stories his grandparents told him. *“Estas enfermedades los azotó, los mato. Y se dice que quedaron solamente eight familias de los 3,000/These diseases whip (hit) them, and kill them. It is said that only eight of 3,000 families survived.”*

The Tsáchila armed themselves with their traditions and medicinal knowledge, in an attempt to combat the diseases.

²⁸ The Afro-Ecuadorian people of the Esmeraldas region introduced the marimba to Ecuador. When a slave ship bound for Peru shipwrecked off the coast of Esmeraldas in the mid 16th century, the African people aboard established a settlement and a distinct identity and culture, preserving elements of their African heritage. Marimba has been an important piece of the Afro-Ecuadorian culture and became part of Tsáchila culture as trade developed between the two groups.

“Como los Tsáchila somos conocidos como buenos chamanes o curanderos/
Because we are known as good Tsáchila shamans or healers,” Don José explains,
“entonces comenzaron ellos a hacer varias ceremonias ritual tomando ayahuasca y
descubrieron que había una cura en el achiote/they began to make several ritual
ceremonies taking *ayahuasca*²⁹ and found that there was a cure in *achiote*³⁰.” They
believed the *achiote* had healing powers and would protect them from illness. It was
during this time that they began the practice of painting their bodies and hair with red
achiote paste.



Some of the ingredients, including the ayahuasca plant, used in a shamanic ceremony in El Poste

²⁹ *Ayahuasca*, also spelled *ayawaska*, is a medicinal tea made from the jungle vine, *Banisteriopsis Caapi*. In the Quechua language, *aya* means “spirit” and *waska* means “vine.” It is sometimes combined with other plants and is used in shamanic ceremonies in Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, and western Brazil. The tea is known for its psychoactive properties and meant to only be used and administered by trained shaman.

³⁰ The seeds of the achiote plant, also known as annatto, are used to make the red paste. Seeing the red painted bodies and hair, the Spaniards to refer to Tsáchila as “Los Colorados,” meaning “colored red/red people.” Despite the fact that the Tsáchila do not accept this name and many find it offensive, the nearby city of Santo Domingo retains the name, Santo Domingo de los Colorados.



Don José opens the achiote plant to expose the red seeds used to make achiote paste. The paste is used for healing and protection. The bracelets seen here are also worn by some Tsáchila, as they are believed to provide additional protection.

The remaining Tsáchila carried on their nomadic lifestyle and thus continued to avoid colonization and any extensive contact through the 19th century, when they were still described by ethnographic studies as “an isolated ethnic group³¹.”

But they were not able to stay isolated much longer. Due to increased trade and development in Ecuador, a path connecting Quito and the Pacific Ocean - passing through Santo Domingo - was constructed in the 18th century. It effectively put Santo Domingo on the map and improved access to the area. Over time, as travel to the region increased, so too did the population and visitors. And amongst them were opportunistic land grabbers.

LANDS LOST, LANDS ASSIGNED

The Tsáchila’s traditional land use practices did not necessitate the concept of land ownership. However, as national infrastructure improved in the mid-20th century, the influx of people did. With no legal titles to the land, the Tsáchila - and the forests they had freely roamed for centuries - found themselves in a vulnerable position. Tourists came to catch a glimpse of the “red people” and those looking for land came and claimed it, some with nothing more than a few rolls of wire.

“I spoke once to a cab driver whose father moved up (to Santo Domingo) from the coast,” recalls Andy Kirby, Executive Director of Yanapuma Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Quito, Ecuador that supports sustainable development projects in indigenous and marginalized communities through collaborative efforts with local and

³¹ Montserrat Ventura i Oller, “Tsachila Indigenous People,” accessed December 17, 2012, http://www.flacsoandes.org/archivo_lenguas/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3Atsachilas&catid=39%3Ablog&Itemid=107&lang=en.

international volunteers and government agencies. “He bought several rolls of wire and just wired off a section of the rainforest to create his farm.”

Although the colonial era in Ecuador had begun 400 years prior, this period of large-scale land invasion in the Santo Domingo region in the mid-20th century marked the beginning of colonization and considerable change for the Tsáchila.

“Aproximadamente unos 40 anos atrás se viene la colonización/Approximately 40 years ago there was colonization,” Don José explains. *“En esta colonización hubo muchos cambios para nosotros. Y ahí es cuando ya vino la deforestación/In (due to) this, there were many changes for us. And that is when deforestation came.”*

Given the global history and present problems of indigenous lands lost, stolen, and destroyed, sadly, the story Don José tells is familiar³². Plots of forest were claimed and cleared by non-Tsáchila, to make way for farms, pasturelands, and plantations. The Tsáchila’s access to the very lands and resources that had sustained and defined their way of life decreased dramatically.

The Ecuadorian government stepped in; first, appropriating some Tsáchila lands, and then, invoking the 1937 Law of Communes³³, returned sections to them and

³² A quick visit to Cultural Survival’s website alone reveals several indigenous communities around the world that are currently struggling with issues related to land rights, invasions, and resource destruction. “Global Response Campaign Alerts,” *Cultural Survival*, accessed online January 11, 2013, <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/take-action>.

³³ The Law of Communes was a countrywide effort intended to ensure the existence and protection of rural communities that were not yet designated under any particular town or parish. Ventura i Oller refers to this as a “mechanism of territory defense guaranteed by the law of the State,” but also acknowledges that this land designated created additional problems for a society that was accustomed to a nomadic lifestyle. Montserrat Ventura i Oller, “The Tsachila Indigenous People,” accessed online December 17, 2012, http://www.flacsoandes.org/archivo_lenguas/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3Atsachilas&catid=39%3Ablog&Itemid=107&lang=en.

established eight *comunas* between 1954 and 1963. El Poste was recognized as a commune in 1954, and officially assigned 1,284 hectares (approximately 3,172 acres) of land in 1967³⁴.

Andy recalls a conversation he had with Alejandro, the cultural leader of a Tsáchila commune in Los Naranjos, about his experience with the government authorities that arrived to implement the land laws. Alejandro was told that he had to “gather together all the families living in the area and stick within the limits of the land that they (the government) were giving to them,” Andy relays, “thus artificially creating the ‘community’.”

The efforts were intended, as Andy explains, “to protect them (the Tsáchila) from complete disintegration.” But the laws were enacted from an outside and arguably colonial perspective, essentially becoming a “legal encroachment.”³⁵ The State law failed to recognize the fundamental culture of the people; narrowing and assigning plots of land communally to a nomadic people that had no tradition of land ownership or collective decision-making.

“It was an alien concept to them,” Andy says. And as such, over time, even these designated lands have been reduced in size, “whittled away by invasion and other illegal measures, losing up to half (of the communal lands) over the last five decades.”

³⁴ Fabiola Jara and Katrien Klep, “Reconstruction of a Society: Indigenous Perceptions of Land and Ecuadorian State Law among the Tsáchila of Northwest Ecuador,” *Development in Place: Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by José C. M. van Santen, 266.

³⁵ Fabiola Jara and Katrien Klep, “Reconstruction of a Society: Indigenous Perceptions of Land and Ecuadorian State Law among the Tsáchila of Northwest Ecuador,” *Development in Place: Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by José C. M. van Santen, 250.

In spite of the legal measures taken by the government to provide a space for the Tsáchila to exist, even today encroachment remains a threat, “with neighbors moving fences back a few meters when they think nobody will notice.” Due to the continued loss of land, one of the original eight *comunas* disappeared entirely.

“Land is a very divisive issue today among the Tsáchila,” Andy confirms. “Their territories were given to them globally, but each Tsáchila family took over a plot for themselves, with some taking over 10 or 15 hectares while others just took less than one hectare. Now there are young Tsáchila with no land to farm, while others have many hectares rented out to *mestizos*³⁶ and living off this income.”

Even those that have been able to retain a piece of land do not have anywhere near enough to live the nomadic life that their ancestors did. Without sufficient land on which to hunt and gather, the majority of Tsáchila that remain in the communes have been integrated into the market economy; some as laborers on neighboring plantations and others as suppliers of market crops, as they made the shift from their former nomadic subsistence existence to the surplus production required by a sedentary lifestyle³⁷.

Meeting basic economic needs is only a tiny piece of a sustainable community puzzle, and fails to address what Jon Hawkes refers to as the “four pillars of sustainability”: the social equity, environmental responsibility, cultural vitality, and economic viability (prosperity beyond basic needs) required for a more holistically

³⁶ *Mestizo* is a term used to refer to people of mixed heritage.

³⁷ Fabiola Jara and Katrien Klep, “Reconstruction of a Society: Indigenous Perceptions of Land and Ecuadorian State Law among the Tsáchila of Northwest Ecuador,” *Development in Place: Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by José C. M. van Santen, 268.

healthy community³⁸. While a plot of land and market crops may provide some Tsáchila with basic economic means to exist in the modern world, simply existing is not the same as living or thriving. Faced with these challenges, some Tsáchila have taken the path of integration: leaving the communes, adopting non-Tsáchila styles of dress, and taking up jobs in cities like Santo Domingo. Others, like Don José, have chosen the path of recuperation: revitalizing traditions, reforesting and repurposing the land, and creating a space for perpetuating Tsáchila culture.

THE PATH

Like many Tsáchila of a generation that was witness to a simultaneous exploitation of their culture as objects of tourism and a marginalization of their people as new members of Ecuadorian society³⁹, when Don José was younger, he had considered abandoning his heritage.

“*Yo no era pintado antes*/I was not painted before,” he says, referring to his hair. It is still Tsáchila tradition for the men to wear their hair shaven on the sides, shaped like a small helmet and painted red on the top with the achiote paste. But, Don José, seen today dressed in the Tsáchila style wrap skirt and with his hair colored red, recalls that at that time, “*No me gustaba*/I didn’t like it.”

Being one of the first two students to attend the first school built in El Poste (his sibling, the other) and the only person in his community that completed a primary school education, as an adult he was called upon to teach workshops to his peers. It was in one

³⁸ Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s essential role in public planning*, 25.

³⁹ Ventura i Oller discusses these contradictions and tensions more thoroughly in “Several representations, internal diversity, one singular people,” 61-67.

of the workshops that Don José's commitment to his culture and community was called into question.

“En esos talleres siempre estaba un sacerdote/In these workshops, there was always a priest,” he recalls. *“El me dice, ‘Por que no te pintas si tu eres Tsáchila?’/He asked me, ‘If you are Tsáchila, why don’t you paint (your hair)?’”*

Those words struck Don José, and he began to more deeply consider his identity and what was becoming of his culture. *“Y yo preguntaba por que se esta perdiendo la vestimenta y las artesanías/And I wondered why we are losing the (traditional) clothing and crafts.”*

The priest advised him to think about it and talk it over with his family. He also gave Don José a glimpse into the possibilities of the future. *“Me dijo que ‘Si usted comenzara a valorizar y vestirse tradicional, usted podría ser de los mejores lideres. Podría ir a las autoridades y te van a atender.’/He told me, ‘If you begin to value and dress traditionally, you could be one of the best leaders. You can go to the authorities and they will respond to you.’”*

He spoke with his family about the conversation with the priest. His father, whom had always told him to *“píntate la cabeza por lo menos/paint your head at least,”* was glad that Don José had finally begun to see the value in carrying on the culture.

“Entonces/Then,” Don José remembers, *“el me dijo, ‘Viste? Ya ahora ya debes entender. Piénsalo. Valoriza lo que tu eres’/He said to me, ‘See? Now you understand. Think about it. It enhances (adds value to) who you are.’”*

It was then that he decided to commit himself to learning and perpetuating Tsáchila traditions. And he quickly discovered he had another great resource in his presence.

“*Gracias a mi madre/Thanks to my mother,*” he says, referring to the ancestral knowledge, particularly of handicrafts, “*que todavía tiene conocimiento hemos aprovechado de ese conocimiento y ahora ya sabemos/that we have taken advantage of that knowledge and now we know (have) the knowledge.*”

He called together 15 families and his mother taught them traditional crafts. Although she possessed the ancestral artisan knowledge, she did not have much faith that it could effectively and respectfully translate to anything of economic value. Luckily, Don José did.

“*Al principio mi madre decía, ‘Quien nos va a comprar nuestra vestimenta?’/At first my mother asked, ‘Who is going to buy our (traditional) clothing/goods?’*” Don José says, “*Ella estaba muy indecisa/She was very uncertain.*”

His mother’s concerns were warranted. And so were Don José’s hopes. The very act of passing knowledge perpetuates culture. As Charles Daid Kleymeyer suggests, “Forms of cultural expression effectively store and transmit information,”⁴⁰; and in that way, her artisan workshops were already beginning to breathe new life into the Tsáchila culture and community of El Poste. There was potential to sell these artisan goods to non-Tsáchila visitors, giving the people of El Poste an economic opportunity and a chance for cultural exchange. But it was uncertain whether non-Tsáchila would see

⁴⁰ Charles David Kleymeyer, “The Uses and Functions of Cultural Expression in Grassroots Development,” *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 22.

enough value in the crafts and clothing - that were of cultural value to the Tsáchila – to pay a fair price⁴¹.

“Un día vinieron unos grupo extranjeros/One day, a group of foreigners came (to visit El Poste),” Don José recalls, *“y se lo llevaron todo/and they took (bought) everything (all of the artisan goods).”*

Don José’s community had discovered one way to revitalize artisan traditions, bring some extra money – and pride - to the community, and share a piece of Tsáchila culture with visitors. *“Entonces ese fue el gran motivo para empezar y seguir elaborando artesanía/So that was the big reason to start and continue to develop crafts.”*

They soon realized it was also possible to share, practice, and perpetuate other traditions important to them.

“Pues entonces de ahí comenzamos a trabajar mas concentradamente en lo que es mas tradicional/Then from there we started working more intently on what is most traditional,” Don José says. *“Pero no solamente fue artesanía sino también la música. Luego fue sobre lo que es en el arte del chamanismo; de las curaciones/But it was not only the crafts, but also music. Then it was about what is in the art of shamanism, of healing.”*

⁴¹ Susan Guyette, author and Executive Director of the organization Cultural Resilience, is of mixed indigenous (Mi'kmaq) and Arcadian French descent and has 25 years of experience working with indigenous and rural communities engaged in cultural tourism. She suggests that providing information about the cultural products to the visitor, “increases respect for cultural aspects of the artwork, increases a fair monetary exchange, and decreases commodification, or seeing traditional artwork as objects without cultural meaning.” “Sustainable Cultural Tourism,” Green Fire Times, accessed online January 9, 2013, <http://greenfiretimes.com/2011/04/sustainable-cultural-tourism/>. Don José and other community members of El Poste offer explanations of the cultural products, as well as medicinal plants, healing practices, clothing styles, and music and dance traditions to visitors interested in learning about these important aspects of Tsáchila culture.

THE PROJECT

Despite the traditional tendency to focus on their individual family units, several families have come together, collaborating to foster cultural energy that, as Kleymeyer suggests, “provides the collective force necessary to begin and sustain group action...the force that enables a culture to renew itself”⁴². With Don José’s guidance, eight El Poste families officially formed a group to lead the *Proyecto de Recuperación*⁴³. Their goal is to revitalize and perpetuate the Tsáchila culture by recovering and practicing cultural traditions, sharing these with visitors, and creating income alternatives for local families.

“*El proyecto que ustedes ven aquí es de nuestro propio esfuerzo*/The project you see here is from our own efforts,” Don José says. “*No tenemos ayuda del gobierno. Las construcciones que tenemos es a nuestro propio esfuerzo*/We have no government help. The buildings we have are of our own effort.”

They have built a cultural center that includes a basic *cocina*⁴⁴, open-air dining and welcome area, a small snack shop, and *cabañas*⁴⁵ to accommodate their guests. The property also has nature trails and a sacred space where Don José, trained as a Tsáchila shaman, facilitates *ayahuasca* ceremonies and conducts traditional healings with medicinal plants.

⁴² Charles David Kleymeyer, *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 31-32.

⁴³ cultural “recovery project”

⁴⁴ kitchen

⁴⁵ cabins



One of the cabañas built to host visitors to El Poste

When guests come to El Poste, whether for a day visit or overnight stay, there is an exchange of cultural and economic benefits. The community has the chance to perpetuate their culture and learn about others; visitors have the opportunity to learn about Tsáchila culture and contribute to the local economy.

The cultural initiative is spreading their enthusiasm and cultural knowledge to the local students as well.

“Ahora últimamente nosotros ya nos sentimos fortalecido/Now, lately, we are feeling strengthened,” Don José says of the initiative, *“Y estamos trabajando en la escuelita, transmitiendo lo que sabemos y hemos hecho por la cultura/And we are working in the schoolhouse, conveying what we know and have done for the culture.”*

They have already begun to see the positive impact that the project has had on the children. Don José explains that the parents are always looking for motivation for the young people. Now, the cultural initiative is providing that. He has noticed that as more visitors come and take an interest in learning about Tsáchila culture, the children of El Poste do as well.

“Entonces está tomando esa fuerza de seguir vistiéndose y sentirse orgullosos. Esa es una de las ventajas/So we get strength in continuing to dress (in traditional style) and (feel/be) proud. That is one of the advantages,” Don José recognizes, *“los hijos pequeños están tomando esas decisiones y esta valorizando eso/young children are making these decisions (on their own) and valuing it.”*

THE PARTNERSHIPS

While the children are learning stewardship of their culture, some of the adults in the community are learning to care for the land. Tsáchila were not accustomed to monoculture farming or producing market crops; the shift to this type of agriculture in the mid-20th century necessitated the knowledge of new farming techniques. They adopted methods learned from neighboring *mestizos*, which often included chemicals. Now, with the support of organizations like Yanapuma Foundation, some Tsáchila are learning more about sustainable agriculture and how to best nurture and utilize the lands that are left. And they are starting to see additional benefits of working together, *within* the community *and as* a community with outside partners.

A great example of this are the layers of partnerships involved in recent reforestation and cacao projects. These projects drew on collaborative efforts of the

community of El Poste, Yanapuma Foundation, and gap year program provider, Thinking Beyond Borders (TBB)⁴⁶. For the first time ever, El Poste families hosted volunteers – a group of about 20 students and three group leaders from TBB – for a period of six weeks. Students lived with host families in their homes, experiencing Tsáchila culture firsthand and sharing their own culture with the host families. They worked with El Poste community members and Yanapuma coordinators in the forests and fields, replanting native species to combat deforestation and sowing the organic, high quality seedlings of the cacao project – organized by Yanapuma staff and El Poste leaders – that is intended to create an alternative income opportunity for El Poste. These projects could not have been realized without collaboration within and amongst the groups and people involved. Although it will take time to see the long-term results, these short-term achievements are worth noting.

⁴⁶ Thinking Beyond Borders arranges international semester and year long educational and experiential programs for students taking a “gap” semester or year. Students that choose to take a “gap” semester or year typically do so after they graduate from high school and prior to starting college.



Volunteers walk to the field where they will plant cacao

THE EL POSTE APPROACH: WHAT'S WORKING

El Poste is more than a group of Tsáchila family units existing on a *comuna*. It is a community that has created the space for cultural revitalization through practice and exchange. They have also invited economic opportunities and environmental stewardship through partnerships and collaboration. The successes they've experienced can be attributed in part to the following principles:

- **Take the reigns.** Or, as Craig Dreeszen says, in his recommendations for developing creative economies, “Do it for yourselves.”⁴⁷ When Don José realized the value of his cultural heritage and the opportunity to invite cultural tourism, he got to work making a plan, calling together families, setting up workshops, and learning more about his culture. If he had waited for someone else to take charge, cultural tourism in El Poste may have fallen into the hands of someone with less genuine intentions⁴⁸.
- **Find a common ground.** For centuries, the Tsáchila’s lifestyle did not typically require them to interact, let alone cooperate, with other family units. Working together can be a challenge. But, in identifying culture and group identity as a source of strength and a tool of grassroots development, Charles David Kleymeyer notes that, “A strong sense of shared identity can energize people and inspire them to take collective action to improve their lives.”⁴⁹ The families involved with the cultural project have found some sense of unity and strength in

⁴⁷ Craig, Dreeszen, “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development,” *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20(March%20'03).pdf), 11.

⁴⁸ The success of the Hualapai Nation of Arizona in developing cultural tourism on their terms, in contrast to the Hopi Nation who moved into tourism more slowly provides an example of some of the possibilities of cultural tourism and the importance of “directing it rather than being directed by it.” “Arizona Tribal Tourism,” Cultural Heritage Tourism, accessed online January 4, 2013, <http://www.culturalheritagetourism.org/successStories/arizona2.htm>.

⁴⁹ Charles David Kleymeyer, “The Uses and Functions of Cultural Expression in Grassroots Development,” *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 19.

their shared goal: to revitalize and sustain the cultural traditions that are important to them and their Tsáchila heritage.

- **...And stay grounded in that.** As Jon Hawkes notes, “Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present.”⁵⁰ The theme that binds and guides the cultural revitalization and tourism projects is Tsáchila heritage. Even in talking about the tourism experience in El Poste, Don José said, “*Nuestra meta es seguir mejor y dar mejor servicio. Pero como Tsáchila*/Our goal is to continue to provide better and better service. But as Tsáchila.”
- **Tap into your (intangible) reserves.** Land grabs, deforestation, and the creation of the communes left the Tsáchila with very little tangible resources. What they did have was a great deal of cultural capital – unique heritage, perspective, and traditions. They have begun to recover and mobilize these cultural assets, “celebrating and investing in cultural histories, values, ideologies, rituals, and programs,”⁵¹ to create economic alternatives and opportunities for cultural exchange in their community.
- **Find the balance and income alternatives.** Don José recognizes that the Tsáchila cannot escape the “modern world”; but they also need not integrate fully into it. He aims to help his community strike a balance that benefits them and allows them to protect and share their culture.
- **Welcome partnerships and training** that will benefit the community.

Advocates of asset-based community development (ABCD), Mike Green, Henry

⁵⁰ Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s essential role in public planning*, 30.

⁵¹ Peggy Eames, *Cultural Well-Being and Cultural Capital*, 31.

Moore, and John O'Brien emphasize the importance of relationship building, stating, "When people join together in new connections and relationships, they build power. When people become more productive together, they exercise their power to address problems and realize dreams. Together we are better."⁵²

Although the notion of partnerships outside of family units was not particularly common to Tsáchila, some of the folks in El Poste have begun to realize the value of these collaborative relationships. Together, they have begun to recover, practice, and share Tsáchila traditions and knowledge, a number of EL Poste families just hosted their first group of volunteer students, and several farmers are learning sustainable agriculture practices from Yanapuma staff.

- **Practice; don't preach.** When he began researching his culture, Don José finally started painting his hair in the Tsáchila style. And since then, he has never stopped. "*Comencé a pintar el cabello. Y ahora ya hace 7 años no me he quitado el achiote*/I started painting (my) hair. And now, for seven years I have not removed the achiote." The children of El Poste don't wear their traditional clothing because they are forced to; they wear it because they choose to. Don José and others involved in the cultural recovery project display enthusiasm for the Tsáchila culture by practicing and sharing it. Cultural revitalization efforts, as Kleymeyer observes, can "develop or reinforce a people's outlook about what they can accomplish as individuals and as a group. Music, dance, and oral tradition can counteract pessimism and the effects of cultural rootlessness and

⁵² Mike Green, Henry Moore, John O'Brien. *When People Care Enough to Act: ABCD In Action*, 17.

alienation, reinforcing a sense of belonging and a positive self-image.”⁵³

Cultural expression can fuel a community’s cultural energy, and in turn, foster a sense of pride.

Don José, as cultural leader of El Poste, is working to put the pieces in place for a sustainable community that both protects its cultural and environmental resources and respectfully harnesses them to create economic opportunities. Striving toward this goal requires that he and his community address challenges that come from inside and outside El Poste. An internal diversity, a long history of family focused decision-making, and an imbalance caused by the uneven distribution of land within the community are all obstacles to organizing and working as a community. The growth of nearby Santo Domingo has led to increased encroachment – physical as well as cultural - compounding the challenges of making a life and a living in El Poste.

The Tsáchila recognize that they are living in new times. Living in new times may require new approaches. For some, this has meant the decision to abandon their Tsáchila heritage. For others, like Don José, who “wish neither to deny who they are nor to cling to the past and pass up the opportunity for better lives,”⁵⁴ it has meant finding ways to overcome the challenges and work together to perpetuate their culture and create opportunities for their community. In addition to individual community projects like El Poste’s *Proyecto de Recuperación*, the seven Tsáchila communities come together in the

⁵³ Charles David Kleymeyer, “The Uses and Functions of Cultural Expression in Grassroots Development,” *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 22.

⁵⁴ Charles David Kleymeyer, “The Uses and Functions of Cultural Expression in Grassroots Development,” *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean* (1994), 22.

spring each year for a celebration called *Kasama*, that involves food, music, drinking, dancing, and an opportunity to exchange ideas. According to Don José, *kasama* means “new way to live” or “living in new times.” The efforts of Don José and El Poste provide an example of the possibilities of adaptation for perpetuation; how Tsáchila might negotiate a “new way to live” without sacrificing all of their old ways of life.

Chapter Two: Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat

Chilamate, Sarapiquí

Costa Rica



The entrance to the Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat and nature reserve, made of recycled materials, welcomes visitors and requests their respect of the land and river.

Chilamate, located in Sarapiquí county in the northern zone of Costa Rica, is small in size, but of great importance to thousands of species of plants and animals. It is one of the Costa Rica's most biologically diverse areas, home to over 500 bird species, 5000 butterfly species, 6000 types of plants, 350 species of trees, 139 mammal species, and 135 reptile species. It is also part of the San Juan-La Selva Biological Corridor, 246,608 hectares (approximately 609,380 acres) of rainforest responsible for maintaining biological continuity between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The Corridor bottlenecks at Chilamate, making it the only feasible place for species with large habitat ranges - such as wild cats and Great Green Macaws - to pass through, when traveling through the greater Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. The ability to move throughout the Corridor is critical to reproduction and survival of these unique species. As such, protection and conservation of Chilamate is essential to ensuring the flow – and ultimately, the continued existence - of biodiversity in the Corridor.

The value of Chilamate is clear, yet it continues to be threatened by the development of pasturelands and monoculture plantations, and the deforestation and chemical contamination that come with them.

"They used to buy up the land," Meghan Casey, owner of Chilamate Eco Retreat (CRER), says of the large-scale, mono-crop producers. First it was banana companies that invaded Sarapiquí, and then came the non-organic pineapple producers. "Now they come in and give small farmers all the chemicals, seeds, all they need to grow pineapple. Then they guarantee to buy it from the farmers."

In an area like Sarapiquí where jobs are scarce, it is understandable that farmers - who would otherwise typically use traditional methods of subsistence farming - could be

tempted by the monetary promises of monoculture production. But, sadly, many have found that the consequences of chemical-heavy crop cultivation are long term and, in some cases, irreversible.

“El problema mas grande es la contaminación, por las piñeras, y bananeras/The biggest problem is contamination, by the pineapple and banana (plantations),” Davis Azofeifa, Meghan’s husband and owner of CRER, explains. *“Las monoculturas usan muchos agroquímicos/Monocultures use a great amount of agrochemicals.”* These chemicals contaminate the soil and water, making it difficult to continue farming the same land.

"The pineapple companies don't end up owning all this wasteland at the end," Meghan says, "The farmers have to deal with it."

The effects of chemical contamination go beyond the land, harming the farmers and plantation workers exposed to them. Meghan shares a story about a friend formerly employed on a banana plantation and recently involved in a lawsuit against the owners. "He was aerial spayed (by chemicals) so many times he's sterile," she explains. And he is not alone. Thousands of workers have come forward with cases of sterility, miscarriages, birth defects, cancer, and other health issues caused by their exposure to chemicals like DBCP (Dibromochloropropane), a pesticide used to kill tiny worms and known as early as 1977 to cause sterility⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ "Pesticide Hazard in Costa Rica," *TED Case Studies*, accessed online January 9, 2013, <http://www1.american.edu/ted/costpest.htm>.

"Costa Rica Banana Workers Sue over Pesticide," *Environmental News Network*, accessed online January 9, 2013, http://www.enn.com/top_stories/article/134.

"Pesticide lawsuits: a DBCP overview, *Bananas!**, accessed online January 9, 2013, <http://www.bananasthemovie.com/pesticide-lawsuits-%E2%80%93-a-dbc-overview>.

Not only do these types of monoculture, mass-producing plantations involve an absurd amount of chemical "cocktails," some of which are actually outlawed in many countries⁵⁶, they also require huge plots of land, involve questionable and often dangerous working conditions, result in unstable, low paying jobs, and sometimes, as is the case in Sarapiquí, attract an influx of illegal immigrants. John H. Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto describe this pattern as a "six-stage process"⁵⁷ in which: (1) Capitalists identify an economic opportunity to expand a market crop, then (2) buy, bribe, or steal land and clear it to grow the crop. (3) They import workers, and (4) when the production of the crop exceeds the demand, they decrease production and thus let a considerable number of workers go. (5) The released employees look for land to grow subsistence crops and (6) end up clearing forest to farm. Thus, putting a strain on the land as well as the local economy and social structure, producing the antithesis of a sustainable community and yet another example of the consequences of prioritizing profit over the well-being of people and planet. This pattern, unfortunately quite common in the tropics, leaves the local economy and society, wage earners, and the environment all to suffer.

“Todo el pueblo fue afectado/The whole town was affected,” Davis says, referring to the impact that the introduction of large-scale plantation culture had on Sarapiquí. He explains that before the big banana companies arrived, families lived and worked their farms, growing what they needed and exchanging goods with neighbors; *“vivían mas tranquilos/they lived tranquilly.”*

⁵⁶ Andrew Wheat, “Toxic Bananas,” *Multinational Monitor*, Volume 17, Number 9, September, 1996. Accessed online December 7, 2012, <http://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/mm0996.04.html>.

⁵⁷ John H. Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto, *Breakfast Of Biodiversity: The Political Ecology of Rain Forest Destruction*, Oakland, California, Food First Books (2005), 4.

But when the monocultures arrived, Davis explains, “*Los jóvenes abandonaron sus fincas familiares para ir a trabajar y vivir en los pueblos de las plantaciones*/The young people began to abandon their family farms in order to work and live in the towns around the plantations.”

And plantation culture brought with it more than seeds and chemicals.

“*Los pueblos se llenaron de vicios, prostitutas, alcohol, apuestas, todas cosas que el pueblo no conocía antes de las bananeras*/The towns filled with young men and bad habits like prostitutes, alcohol, bets, all things that the towns did not have before the banana plantations.”

Despite the social and environmental destruction caused by large-scale plantations, pineapple production continues to grow and expand in Costa Rica. In the last 10 years alone, the country increased the area used for pineapple by more than 300 percent⁵⁸. Pineapple production has become so common in Costa Rica that plantation visits have become a tourist attraction and the country, tour guides will proudly tell you, boasts the title of the biggest pineapple exporter in the world, pumping out more than 1.5 million tons of the controversial crop in 2010⁵⁹.

The devastation of biodiversity, disruption of the traditional family farming culture, increase in population, damage to soil and water, and innumerable instances of sickness and disease, make a clear case that pineapple produced on this scale is not

⁵⁸ Will Ferguson, “Costa Rica’s pineapple boom unhealthy, warn experts,” Tico Times, May 27, 2011. Accessed online December 7, 2012, http://www.ticotimes.net/Current-Edition/Top-Story/News/Costa-Rica-s-pineapple-boom-unhealthy-warn-experts_Friday-May-27-2011.

⁵⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, “AAACP Products: Pineapple,” accessed online December 7, 2012, <http://www.unctad.info/en/Infocomm/AACP-Products/COMMODITY-PROFILE---Pineapple/>.

sustainable and should *not* be a point of pride for Costa Rica. The destructive practices and plethora of pesticides are in direct conflict with the earth-first, “No Artificial Ingredients”⁶⁰ image promoted by the country’s tourism industry. Yet the monocultures continue to grow - while the Costa Rican Tourism Institute continues to cover its advertising campaigns in a green glow - damaging not only the local culture and environment, but also risking Costa Rica’s reputation as an eco-friendly destination.

This reputation was not initially earned on idealistic advertisements, but by the diverse natural landscapes and species, the cultural and environmental assets the country possesses, and the eco-responsible projects and people that work to protect them. In spite of the presence of polluting plantations, several of these real reasons for Costa Rica’s ecotourism destination reputation can be found in Sarapiquí.

The Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat (CRER) provides an example of sustainable living and an ecotourism project that genuinely respects and benefits the environment and community. The owners, Davis and Meghan, work to reverse damages done, prevent further destruction, and offer earth-friendly and community-conscious alternatives to the money-minded promises made by monocultures.

⁶⁰ In 1996, the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) launched an advertising campaign with the slogan, “Costa Rica: No Artificial Ingredients.” This slogan is still used today and in fact, in 2010, when the ICT amped up its advertising, this slogan appeared in subways, train stations, and on billboards in major cities across the U.S. and Canada. “New Costa Rica tourism campaign promotes ‘pura vida’ in U.S.,” *Tico Times*, accessed online January 9, 2013, http://www.ticotimes.net/Business/New-Costa-Rica-tourism-campaign-promotes-pura-vida-in-U.S._Friday-January-28-2011

THE DREAM

Meghan didn't necessarily come to Costa Rica with the intention of building an eco retreat. But she did come with an interest in sustainable development and a passion for the people involved.

Through a contract with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and a series called "Java Journey," Meghan and a fellow Canadian lived with, worked alongside, and reported on the lives of coffee farmers in Costa Rica, at a time when the coffee industry was in crisis. A global supply scarcity during the mid 1990s caused prices and production to rise in the years that followed⁶¹. Consequently, the supply far exceeded the demand, and coffee farmers suffered.

When Meghan's CIDA contract ended in 2003, coffee was still in crisis, and the farmers searched for ways to diversify their income. Meghan stuck around to help. Her research turned up at least one way the farmers could branch out and bring in other income: coffee tours. In 2007, the coffee cooperative Meghan was working with, CoopeSarapiquí, began offering the Mi Cafecito Coffee Tour. The tour proved to be more than an economic opportunity; it has served as a tool of sustainability, allowing the farmers to continue doing what they love while creating an arena for sharing sustainable farming and cooperative culture with visitors.⁶²

While on a holiday from her work, and far from their current home in Sarapiquí, Meghan first met her Costa Rican husband, Davis, on the opposite side of the country.

⁶¹ International Coffee Organization's Executive Director, a copy of the submission, "Lessons from the world coffee crisis: A serious problem for sustainable development," (UNCTAD XI Conference, São Paulo, Brazil, June 13-18, 2004), accessed online December 30, 2012, <http://dev.ico.org/documents/ed1922e.pdf>.

⁶² CoopeSarapiquí still offers this tour today, and has also found other ways to bring in money, such as a cooperative grocery store and sales of their topsoil.

"We met on the Pacific Coast," Meghan recalls. "But he's actually from Sarapiquí!"

At that time, and in spite of Davis's close ties to Sarapiquí, Chilamate wasn't even on their radar.

"We originally planned to go to Canada and make some money," Meghan explains.

Their hope was to first work and save, so they could eventually return to Costa Rica to establish a sustainable eco-project that would serve to protect the environment and benefit the community.

"Siempre soñaba hacer algo que pudiera ayudar a los demás/I always dreamed of doing something where I could help others," Davis says, *"Siempre era mi meta, o inspiración como niño/It was always my goal or inspiration as a child."*

While they awaited Davis's visa, they moved to Sarapiquí to spend time with his family.

"After about six months, we got tired of waiting," Meghan recalls. "We looked everywhere for a job we could do together, something we could do as a family."

"La unión hace la fuerza/The union is strength," Davis says, emphasizing the importance of the strength derived from a family unit. *"Siempre he pensado en unión familiar, con un negocio familiar poder crecer juntos/I have always thought of family union, with a family business to be able to grow together."*

The couple's first baby was on the way and they didn't want to be apart just as they were building a family together.

"I didn't want to be at home all day and him at work all day just to make ends meet," Meghan adds. "We really wanted to do a family project."

"Siempre fue mi inspiración ayudar a mi familia, mi barrio, y mi gente/It was always my inspiration to help my family, my neighborhood, and my people," Davis explains.

They also hoped to find a way to protect and share the rich, natural environment of Sarapiquí in a sustainable way.

"This area is really important in terms of conservation," Meghan explains. "So we were really interested in (finding a way to support) that."

THE PROPERTY

As more time passed, no opportunities in conservation work emerged, and no visa arrived, Meghan and Davis's dream seemed to slip further and further away. Until the day they discovered- while escaping to cool off in the Sarapiquí River - it was actually right in front of them.

On one of their visits to the river, they noticed what appeared to be a garden. Their curiosity led them onto an all but abandoned property.

"We asked the caretakers if it was for sale. They took down our phone number," Meghan recalls, "And a few days later, the owner called us."

The owner, a teacher in San Jose and a member of the Lumsden family, had friends and family in Sarapiquí. It didn't take long to realize that she, Meghan, and Davis shared more than a list of acquaintances; they shared a desire to protect the property and the biodiversity found on it.

For more than 60 years, the Lumsden family stood on the side of conservation even when selling, felling, or developing the forest would have been more lucrative. In 2000, in an effort to more officially protect the property and create a sustainable tourism project, they formed the Sociedad Chilamate Jungle SRL (Chilamate Jungle Ltd.).

"Their goal was to do a project like what we've got now," Meghan explains. But after a central force behind Sociedad Chilamate Jungle SRL passed away, the owner simply wasn't able to carry on the project. And so there it sat, abandoned for seven years, with only the caretakers there to enjoy this peaceful, unique piece of rainforest the Lumsden family had worked so hard to protect.

The conservation project Meghan and Davis had been searching for was right there, in Sarapiquí. And it was for sale. The owner had other offers, but she wouldn't sell to just anybody; she would only sell to someone that was from Sarapiquí *and* dedicated to protecting it. Meghan and Davis fit the bill.

But acquiring the property and developing it into an eco retreat would involve a great deal of time, energy, and of course, money. Meghan and Davis possessed the passion needed to fuel the vision and construction of the retreat; fortunately, Meghan's family and the owner provided the support they needed to get started.

In November of 2006, the couple's dream finally began to translate into reality; they became the owners of Chilamate Jungle, Ltd.

THE PROJECT



The sign and covered walkway, made from recycled wood

Although Meghan and Davis's acquisition of the property seems quite serendipitous, serendipity fails to account for the hard work, humility, frugality, resourcefulness, commitment to conservation, respect for community and environment, and personal investments they've made in their continued and conscientious efforts to transform their vision into a genuinely green project.

A rainforest reserve with a few abandoned structures doesn't come with an instruction manual; the new owners had to seek out the knowledge and training needed to create a sustainable ecotourism project.

“When we got the property,” Meghan recalls, “the first thing we did was go and get books on sustainable tourism.”

The success of sustainable projects, like sustainable communities, relies on a holistic approach. Meghan and Davis knew they would need more than books; they needed a variety of skills - such as planning, accounting, and finance - to properly foster environmental, social, cultural, and economic sustainability.

With the help of the Costa Rican Bird Group, Meghan and Davis had the opportunity to participate in training from the Rainforest Alliance, an international non-profit that strives to protect the planet’s biodiversity and support sustainable livelihoods through conservation, education, training, outreach, certification and verification programs, and the development of sustainable alternatives to forest destruction. Due in part to the application of the knowledge and skills they’ve gained from the training, Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat has received three full audits (verifications) by the Rainforest Alliance. They also continue to receive guidance; the Rainforest Alliance not only visits CRER to verify the facilities, practices, and activities, they also leave them with tips, ideas, tools, and resources for additional improvements. CRER consistently receives high marks in sustainable tourism and best practices. And they have worked hard to earn them.

With the support of a few locally hired staff and the Rainforest Alliance’s Best Practices Guide for Sustainable Tourism, Meghan and Davis converted very basic accommodations and eating facilities into livable spaces that work in harmony with and pay tribute to the natural environment within which they exist. The design of the buildings allow for natural lighting, air, and insulation. Solar energy powers the cabins,

rainwater is captured and employed for cleaning and washing purposes, waste is recycled and composted, and only biodegradable cleaning products are used on the property.

Wood, glass, and other materials that may have otherwise been discarded have been given new life at CRER.



Recycled materials were used to make recycling receptacles accessible to guests, without disrupting the colorful natural environment.

"My husband is really good at recycling and using whatever he can to make things," Meghan says glancing around. "All of the glass in the lodge was stored at our old house. He used to buy it from the garbage man," she adds, laughing, "I'd ask, 'What

are you doing with that? And he'd say, 'One of these days, that glass is going to be the windows of your house!'"

Davis kept his word: when they first moved onto the property, the lodge was their home. And many of the other materials found at the Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat have also been recycled in one form or another. The wood on the covered walkways was previously used on a pepper farm. The herb gardens near the lodge are fenced in with recycled bottles. The cabins were built from “waste wood” deemed “too curvy and deformed” by local mills. The lookout was made from used gates and old wood removed from the nearby bridge, when new boards were put down.



Plastic containers are reused as fencing for herb gardens at CRER.



When new boards were laid on a nearby bridge over the Río Sarapiquí, old boards were reused at CRER.

Their commitment to the environment is clear. So much so, in fact, it sometimes comes into conflict with the expectations of visitors. Finding a balance between the requests of guests and the purposes of an eco-project can be tricky⁶³. A decision that may seem simple from the outside, such as whether to offer amenities - like hot water and wifi - that are increasingly expected by travelers, must be evaluated against the environmental impact.

⁶³ A similar challenge created by “pressures to please the public” is also seen in other areas of tourism, such as heritage tourism and museums. *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, 185.

“That’s the thing with tourism,” Meghan acknowledges, “It’s a vicious cycle. You’re trying to do an eco business, but you are trying to please customers.”

When it comes to these difficult decisions, Meghan and Davis use their conservation and community goals as a guide.

“We don’t want to change the essence of our project to fit them. So we’ll only go so far.”

For example, they have installed wifi, but only in the reception area and they shut it down each night at 10 PM to conserve energy. They have opted to offer hot water in the five private cabins, but chose to keep cold water in their home and the lodge that hosts large student and volunteer groups.

"The idea was never to make a fancy place," Meghan explains. The goal was conservation, living in harmony with the surroundings, and "making a place that is comfortable for my North American family and our guests"; two groups of visitors that, with the hospitality shown and knowledge and laughter shared, quite seamlessly become one in the same during a visit to CRER.

THE RELATIONSHIPS

Meghan, Davis, and the CRER family extend this same sense of care and friendship to their community.

"Before we even opened this place, I was giving English and environmental education classes at the local schools. When we first got here, most of the kids I talked to had never walked in the rainforest!" Meghan explains. "So the first thing we did was make sure that all the local students came and walked in our reserve."

This tradition continues today. Each year, Meghan and Davis bring local children in to visit the reserve, and are working to expand the environmental and community programs.

In 2008, they started a women's group with some of their neighbors. The evolution of and relationships built within the women's group quickly expanded to benefit the community and further the reach of the CRER mission.

"I was working with them, training to do homestays, and now it's moved into other things," Meghan says of the women's group. "We've had art workshops, food safety training, and language trainings."

Seeing their success, other members of the community and nearby communities began calling.

"We were invited to their homes and more people called," Meghan says. "Now we buy all of our products - plantains, the squash in the soup last night, chayote, milk, eggs, cheese, fruits and vegetables, as much as we can - from local people."

Meghan and Davis have built partnerships that go beyond buying, selling, and serving community-sourced products. They also encourage guests to visit the small-scale, local farms, have lunch with the farming families, stay in a homestay, and learn about the challenges and rewards of sustainable agriculture in action. And they ensure that their partners and staff receive fair compensation.

"We've found being able to support local farmers is so rewarding," Meghan adds, "in terms of health benefits *and* for the community."

The benefits of these partnerships are shared. Community members acquire new skills, receive opportunities for cultural exchange, and the chance to diversify their

income. CRER continues to strengthen their relationships with community members and facilitate unique experiences for the host families and their guests. And guests enjoy the cultural exchange and the incredibly fresh food that comes from the local family farms. Together, these groups are protecting an important place of biodiversity and a sustainable, organic farming culture that might otherwise be swallowed up by the chemical-heavy, monoculture - first of banana, now of pineapple - that has invaded the area.

THE CRER APPROACH: WHAT'S WORKING

The Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat stands as a model of the possibilities of a genuinely green project and an alternative to pasturelands and plantations. Meghan, Davis, and their partners are living testament to what can be achieved through cooperation, sustainable living, and a commitment to community and the environment. Key ingredients in their recipe for success include:

- **Remain true to the enviro-vision and commitment to community**, and use this to guide decisions. In creating and maintaining their project, Meghan and Davis must continuously consider the benefits and harms that tourism can bring. They must keep in mind the question Susan Guyette raises in her article on “Sustainable Cultural Tourism”: “The question is, how to consciously incorporate tourism without negatively impacting a community.”⁶⁴ And in the case of CRER and a holistic approach, their consideration of “community” includes the people,

⁶⁴ Susan Guyette, “Sustainable Cultural Tourism,” Green Fire Times, accessed online January 9, 2013, <http://greenfiretimes.com/2011/04/sustainable-cultural-tourism/>.

environment, and economy. Addressing this question sometimes means making difficult decisions, such as breaking ties with partners that switch to non-sustainable practices or opting for less amenities in an effort to live in harmony with the environment and conserve resources.

- **Lead by example.** Meghan and Davis live on the property and practice the same sustainable living values they espouse.
- Work to **support and create sustainable, eco-friendly income alternatives** using assets already available. The success of an asset-based community development (ABCD) strategy, according to John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, is “asset-based, internally focused, relationship driven.”⁶⁵ Meghan and Davis have done well to identify assets in their community – both cultural and environmental – and then mobilize these toward building relationships in and creating opportunities for the community. They have demonstrated this through mutually beneficial community partnerships; buying, serving, and selling local products, offering local organic farm agro-tours to guests, and sharing knowledge and access to the CRER property.
- **Celebrate and protect the natural wealth of the area** *and* share this with locals and guests. In *Native Tours*, Erve Chambers discusses the benefits and risks of ecotourism, noting that while it can serve to protect the natural assets of an area, educate, and stimulate a sense of pride, there is the risk of straining resources - to

⁶⁵ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, Institute for Policy Research (1993), introduction available online, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/abcd/GreenBookIntro.pdf>.

accommodate guests attracted by ecotourism - to consider⁶⁶. Through activities such as educational outreach, nature walks, and the recent addition of River Fest - a community event that brings together local arts, food, and people to celebrate the Río Sarapiquí - CRER engages the local community and educates guests while promoting the protection of these assets and aiming to minimize impact.

- **Welcome training** and new skills that will benefit the project. Craig Dreeszen, in his report on “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship, and Sustainable Development,” stresses the importance of providing and engaging in ongoing training⁶⁷. Although he refers to examples of arts skills training, he also emphasizing the need for entrepreneurial training and “technical assistance” in areas such as planning, design, and funding. Meghan and Davis have taken a holistic approach in creating and maintaining their project; seeking and receiving training in areas related to sustainable tourism such as accounting, design, and finance, with the help of the Rainforest Alliance, PROMES⁶⁸, and the Costa Rican Bird Group.
- **Stay involved** in local decision-making. Both Meghan and Davis have a number of positions and responsibilities within the community. Davis is the president of

⁶⁶ Erve Chambers, *Native Tours*, 85.

⁶⁷ Craig Dreeszen, “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development,” *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20(March%20'03).pdf).

⁶⁸ PROMES (*Promoviendo Mercados Sostenibles/Promoting Sustainable Markets*) was a four year project of EARTH University, funded primarily by the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID), devoted to small and rural entrepreneurs in the northern region of Costa Rica, the creation of sustainable markets there, and the training and guidance of local communities and organizations that support these. Accessed online, December 29, 2012, <http://www.proyectopromes.org>.

the board at Linda Vista School, Meghan is the Vice President of the board at the Chilamate School and the Costa Rican coordinator for the World Leadership School, and both are founding members of the community policing program and are on the steering committee for the San Juan-La Selva Biological Corridor.

Sustainability, at its core, is about the capacity to maintain, support, and endure without exhausting resources or inflicting damage. Through CRER, Meghan and Davis have created a circle of sustainability in which all involved can benefit *and* strengthen the circle by participating. “When we started,” Meghan says, “our goal was first and foremost to make it a social project. If our neighbors and local community feel they can benefit from our project, then they will look out for conservation.” Meghan and Davis create opportunities for the community, the community shares their culture and knowledge with guests while continuing their small scale farming lifestyle, the guests support an eco-friendly project and contribute to the community, and all contribute to the protection of Chilamate.



A lookout made from recycled wood allows visitors to spot a variety of species of birds native to the area, watch howler monkeys swing from the trees, and enjoy the view over the Río Sarapiquí.

Chapter Three: Finca Organica el Paraiso

El Paraiso, Sarapiquí

Costa Rica



Daniel, his wife, and two of their daughters, outside their home at Finca Organica

Since the establishment of the first road in Sarapiquí in 1925, the area has undergone tremendous changes. From government granted monetary incentives for those willing to clear forests for pastures to tracts of land gifted to political supporters, from largely unsuccessful experimentation with rice crops and cattle ranching to the notorious banana boom and now the current and controversial chemical-intensive pineapple plantations, the lands and forests of this region have been manipulated and the soil and native species have suffered.

In the small town of El Paraiso⁶⁹, surrounded by 9,000 hectares (22, 240 acres) of non-organic pineapple plantations, an organic farmers' community has emerged. Daniel, the head of the organic farmers' association and owner of Finca Organica el Paraiso, is using a combination of traditional and innovative farming techniques to rejuvenate the land and inspire the community.

Given Daniel's compassion for and dedication to his community, one might naturally assume El Paraiso to be his birthplace. On the contrary, he is quite far from home. When he was a child, his parents moved the family from the southern Pacific coast to the northern region of Sarapiquí. They are one of many families that migrated to the area, drawn by the prospect of banana plantation employment.

Although their work on the plantations required the use of chemicals, Daniel's parents already possessed some knowledge of organic farming techniques. The truth is, due to the variety of crops found on subsistence farms, the smaller production scale, and the high cost of agrochemicals, many small farm families in Costa Rica come by some sustainable and organic practices naturally.

⁶⁹ The name of the town translates to "Paradise."

Daniel's parents passed their knowledge on to him. Although subsistence farming can put food on the table, it doesn't generate an income; Daniel needed to find work. With few other options in Sarapiquí, he eventually followed in his father's footsteps and took a job on a banana plantation. He worked on the plantations in Sarapiquí for much of his life. He witnessed the destruction caused by large scale, chemical-heavy, mono-crop cultivation. He suffered the damages to his health caused by the same. And he was motivated to find an alternative way to care for the land and for his family.

Fortunately, through a program operated by the IDA (*Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario/Agrarian Development Institute*)⁷⁰, Daniel was able to acquire the land he needed to get started.

⁷⁰ The IDA was established in 1961 in an effort to increase agricultural production, create small farmers, and avoid large land holdings. One of the IDA programs granted *parcelas agrícolas* (plots of land for agriculture) to Costa Ricans, like Daniel, that had never owned land. The IDA required the recipients to farm the land for 10 years while paying an extremely reduced rate, in order to earn the legal title for the property. El Paraiso is largely made up of these *parcelas agrícolas*. The IDA has come under fire recently for the alleged illegal titling and sale of lands to benefit their own employees rather than the agricultural sector it was intended to develop. Daniel's property is an example of the small farms that this program aimed to create. "The Government Targets IDA Properties," *Costa Rica Law*, accessed online January 1, 2013, <http://www.costaricalaw.com/the-government-targets-ida-properties.html>.

THE FARM



Goats graze and provide milk for the family at sustainable farm Finca Organica.

Visitors to Costa Rica are not likely to find Finca Organica in their travel guide or El Paraiso on their map, yet Daniel's farm has managed to attract the attention of the Costa Rican government. In 2007, former president Óscar Arias Sánchez set an ambitious goal for the country: Achieve carbon neutrality by 2021. With this goal in mind - and a great deal of work ahead of them - government officials paid a visit to Finca Organica, a model of the possibilities of low cost, sustainable agriculture, to find out just what Daniel is up to.

From the moment Daniel began working the land on his property, he was presented with challenges.

“En la fincas organicas hay mucho monte/In the organic farms, there are a lot of mountains (obstacles)” Daniel says. *“Nos enfrentamos a retos cada dia/We face challenges every day.”*

The very soil on which he planned to develop his farm had been tainted with chemicals.

“Estoy rejuveneciendo la finca de todo los quimicos que fueron utilizados por el ultimo dueno/I’m rejuvenating the farm getting rid of the chemicals utilized by the previous owner.”

He turns up some soil with his boot to show the smooth texture and explains that the soil was not always this smooth; he nurtured it back to this healthy state, using *microorganismo de montaña* (MM). MM is a “good bacteria” found on the forest floor. EARTH University, a private, non-profit, international university with a strong commitment to environmental sustainability, developed it for use in a variety of organic agriculture practices of farmers like Daniel.

“Antes la tierra era muy mala/The earth here was really bad,” Daniel recalls. *“Ahora esta mejor con todas las materiales naturales, los microorganicos. Asi la tierra ha cambiado a major/Now thanks to all the natural materials and microorganisms, it is getting better. The earth has changed in a major way.”*

This same patience, determination, and commitment to organic agriculture have served him well in the development of other areas of the farm.

“Todo aqui es organico/Everything here is organic,” Daniel says, adding, *“Es para cuidar mi familia y mis clients/It is to take care of my family and my clients.”*

Even *los cerdos*⁷¹ eat right at Finca Organica. Daniel's wife tends to the pigs, feeding them organic, vegetarian only foods found on the farm. Ensuring their meals are hormone and chemical free is one critical key to keeping the soil, crops, family, and farm free of these intruders as well. The pigs are the heart of the sustainable cycle on the farm; they provide waste that can be converted to fertilizer for growing crops and - with the help of the biodigester – natural gas for cooking meals.

“Utilizo las excretas para hacer abonos organicos/I use the manure for organic fertilizer,” Daniel says, *“Ellos (los cerdos) comen el pasto, y vuelve a la finca; es como un reciclaje/They (the pigs) eat the grass/plants from the farm, and it returns to the farm; it's like recycling.”*

Daniel goes on to explain the other use for his pigs' “recyclables.” He puts the waste into a biodigester where it ferments, naturally releasing methane gas. This gas is then piped to the kitchen and used for cooking; thus simultaneously removing methane – one of the most harmful greenhouse gases - from the environment, eliminating the need to burn fossil fuels, and minimizing the risks - to people and planet - of releasing carcinogens associated with those fuels.

⁷¹ the pigs



Daniel, explaining how his homemade biodigester (pictured) works.

The kitchen is not the only area in which Daniel, his wife, and five children are making choices that make a difference and leave negligible to zero impact on the environment. Throughout the farm, sustainable, eco-friendly techniques are employed. Rather than chemicals that contaminate soil and water supplies, they choose plants, such as citronella, as natural insecticides and flowers to attract pollinators.

“Hacemos repelentes para humanos y animals/We make insect repellants for people and animals,” Daniel says, *“porque aqui no matamos nada/Because we don’t kill anything here.”*



Daniel shows a bottle of natural repellent he makes from the citronella plant, seen here in the bucket on the right.

They also use the MM to eliminate odors and combat bad bacteria that may otherwise pose health threats to the family and animals on the farm. Plastic jugs are recycled and reused as containers for the microorganism, fertilizer, and citronella, often sold to neighboring farmers. Each decision made on the farm is intended to complement and perpetuate the sustainable cycle, rendering Finca Organica a living classroom, a place for others to learn about sustainable, alternative, and affordable agricultural techniques.

THE PROJECT



The primary project on the farm is the prized – and profitable - black pepper. Daniel has been told that his pepper is “*la mejor calidad del mundo*”/the best quality in the world. On a scale of eight possible points, Finca Organica’s pepper is a 7.8⁷². Although Daniel says he is not sure exactly why the pepper is the best, he can confirm that no chemicals are used on the pepper – or any plants – on his farm. The fertilizer used on the pepper plants is all natural and made at Finca Organica. When the plants are young, Daniel also uses a technique involving aluminum foil to wrap the roots, keeping them warm and making them stronger.

⁷² Comparatively, Brazil and India are both a 5, Indonesia is a 4.3, and Japan is a 4.



Roots of a young pepper plant will be wrapped in aluminum foil.

He currently exports the pepper to a US-based company, but also hopes to eventually enter it into pepper fairs to compete. If it could earn the official title of “Best Pepper in the World,” it would of course, bring additional income - and quite possibly visitors - to his farm. And this would be great news for his secondary project: agro-tourism. Sarapiquí, with its thousands of hectares of monoculture plantations, is home to a variety of farm and plantation tours. But only a handful of these use and demonstrate organic and sustainable agricultural practices⁷³. Bringing more attention to his peppers would bring more attention to his farm, and in turn, awareness of sustainable agriculture.

⁷³ See inset on page 76 for other organic tours offered in the Sarapiquí region.



Pepper plants at Finca Organica

Since opening the farm up to international students and volunteers just one year ago, Finca Organica has recieved approximately 60 volunteers, chiefly from American universities. Eight families in the organic farmers' association have hosted visitors in their homes, and nearly 20 families in total are prepared to. Daniel has strengthened community relationships and facilitated trainings⁷⁴. With the help of Meghan and Davis, owners of Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat (CRER), the families have participated in food, ESL, and cultural awareness

Supporting Sustainable Agriculture in Sarapiquí: Organic Farm Tours

In spite of the thousands of hectares of non-organic plantations that have saturated the Sarapiquí region, organic practices are being employed and shared by a handful of farms. Visitors to the region can support these earth-friendly efforts, learn about sustainable agriculture, and sample the finished products by booking a visit to **Finca Organica** and/or the following:

Finca Corsicana: The world's largest organic pineapple farm. Guests can tour the farm and learn about the pineapple production process and organic techniques used.
http://www.collinstreet.com/pages/finca_corsicana_home

Tirimbina Chocolate Tour: Take a guided hike in the Tirimbina forest, learn about the traditional and cultural history of the native cacao plant, the process by which it is made into chocolate, and the cultivation practices that make it one of the most eco friendly. Please note: The cacao plot is not in commercial use; it currently serves an educational purpose only.
<http://www.tirimbina.org/ecotourism/chocolate-tour.html>

Mi Cafecito Coffee: Visit the organic coffee farm, learn about the process from seed to cup, and enjoy the flora and fauna of the region with a hike through the forest trails and a walk along the Río Sarapiquí.
<http://www.micafecitocoffeetour.com/mi-cafecito-coffee-tour.html>

sessions as well as sustainable and organic agriculture trainings provided by PROMES⁷⁵ and the Rainforest Alliance.

⁷⁴ Craig Dreeszen suggests that two keys to building creative, sustainable economies are "Build coalitions" and "Provide ongoing training and education." Daniel is actively doing these things for his community. "Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development," *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20(March%20'03).pdf).

⁷⁵ PROMES (*Promoviendo Mercados Sostenibles/Promoting Sustainable Markets*), accessed online, December 29, 2012, <http://www.proyectopromes.org>.

Daniel explains that tourism in El Paraiso has brought numerous benefits to the community⁷⁶. In addition to the income from payments for accommodations and food, Daniel affirms, “*Hay mas beneficios/There are more benefits,*” such as social benefits. “*Por ejemplo, hicieron un patio de recreo a los niños en la escuela. Muy importante para los niños. Ellos ejercicio, perder peso, y estudiar mejor/For example, they (the visiting students) built a playground at the school. This is very important to the children. (Now, with the playground) They exercise, lose weight, and study better.*”

The community members are not the only beneficiaries; there is an “equitable exchange.”⁷⁷ The visitors also enjoy their experience in El Paraiso; they have an opportunity to not only learn about sustainable, organic farming but also enjoy the chance for cultural exchange in a rural community in Costa Rica.

“*Los muchachos cuando vienen al pais, viene para hacer capacitaciones y aprender de la finca/When they come to the country, they come to train and learn about the farm,*” Daniel says, referring to the foreign students. The local families and foreign

⁷⁶ Another recommendation Craig Dreeszen makes for building creative, sustainable economies is “Stimulate cultural heritage tourism.” The organic farmers’ association is seeing some of the benefits of sharing their local, small-farming community and Costa Rican culture with guests. “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development,” *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20(March%20'03).pdf).

⁷⁷ Susan Guyette, author and Executive Director of the organization Cultural Resilience, is of mixed indigenous (Mi'kmaq) and Arcadian French descent and has 25 years of experience working with indigenous and rural communities engaged in cultural tourism. She notes that “The exchange of information on lifeways, customs, beliefs, values, language, views of the environment, and other cultural resources is usually uneven,” with the balance of benefits often tipped in favor of the tourist. She warns that the challenge is “to ensure as equitable an exchange takes place, in a manner seen as appropriate by members of the host community.” In El Paraiso, according to Daniel, the benefits are shared. “Sustainable Cultural Tourism,” *Green Fire Times*, accessed online January 9, 2013, <http://greenfiretimes.com/2011/04/sustainable-cultural-tourism/>.

visitors quickly become friends. *“Cuando hacemos las despedidas, todos lloran/When we say our goodbyes, everyone cries.”*

Daniel and the organic farmers’ association hope to continue to grow the ecotourism project and invite more visitors to come, learn, taste, experience, appreciate, and share a piece of El Paraíso.

THE RELATIONSHIPS

After meeting Meghan and Davis, owners of CRER, while attending sustainable agriculture training, Daniel formed a friendship with them. Realizing their shared interests and passion for sustainability, they established a partnership by which they could all gain strength and further the goals of their projects, support the creation of economic alternatives, exchange ideas, *and* continue to care for the earth. In addition to the host family trainings they have helped to facilitate, Meghan and Davis also buy and serve the organic farmers’ association organic products at CRER and offer farm visits and homestays to their guests, thus bringing an opportunity for exchange and exposure.

“They want to bring as many people as they can from all across the world to learn about their project,” Meghan says of their enthusiasm.

Daniel shares an example of a small group of volunteers from Finland who recently spent four days with his family. In addition to helping him with work on the farm, their economic contribution for room and board was also beneficial to Daniel and his family.

“En la parte economico me ayuda a mi cuando hemos tenido estudiantes o turismo/On the economic side, it is helpful to me when I’ve had students or tourism,”

Daniel explains, “*Me ayuda para yo poder darle una mejor condicion de vida a mi familia...que comprarles libros para que estudien, salud, algunos nutricion, vitaminas, puedo pagar a la caja al Seguro Social/It helps me to give my family a better life...to buy books to study, (it’s helpful for our) heath, nutrition, vitamins, and I can pay Social Security (for health insurance).*”

“*Nos ayuda un monton/It helps a lot,*” he continues, “*y tambien me ayuda a mi para yo meterle a la finca. Ellos hicieron eso, vivimos esa experiencia y me gusto mucho/And also it helps me to invest in my farm. When they came and supported me, we had a great experience and I liked it a lot.*”

Daniel is also committed to teaching fellow *Ticos*⁷⁸. While studying in the sustainable agriculture courses, he learned a variety of techniques and ingredients – used in India, Japan, Brazil, and the United States - for making fertilizers. Now, on his farm, he provides free of charge trainings, instructions, and demonstrations for local farmers, spreading the knowledge further and building bonds within the community.

THE PROBLEM

Not everyone in El Paraiso is interested in learning about organic, sustainable agriculture. Some people even want to stop Daniel from teaching it.

“*Ellos no quieren que yo pase mis conocimientos/They don’t want me to spread my knowledge,*” he explains, “*Dicen que lo orgánico es malo y es mentira... y le dicen a*

⁷⁸ *Tico* is a colloquial term commonly used in place of “Costa Rican.” It is not considered derogatory and one theory of its origin is that *Tico* is short for *Hermanitico* (“Little Brother” with a suffix *-tico* that is used in Costa Rica, rather than the suffix *-ito* that is used in other Spanish Speaking cultures), making it a familiar and friendly expression.

los otros que no vengan/They say organic is evil and it's a lie...they tell others not to come (to Finca Organica)."

It is not just what they say that is problematic; their actions have actually hindered his work. In addition to spreading lies, promoting practices that involve chemicals, and discouraging farmers from learning about organic alternatives, Daniel's opponents have blocked the road to prevent other farmers from accessing Finca Organica.

"*Pero/But,*" Daniel says grinning, "*estoy muy contento/I am very content (satisfied).*" He is not pleased with the people who oppose what he is teaching, but he is happy to have earned the support of a group that arguably holds more power: the government.

"*No es mentira/It's not a lie,*" Daniel says, referring to organics, "*El gobierno se fija y me apoya, porque ellos tienen el proyecto Carbono Neutro. Yo estoy metido en el proyecto Carbono Neutro evitar por todos los medios no contaminar/The government saw that and they support me because they have the Carbon Neutral Project. I'm working on the Carbon Neutral project (working to) avoid all means of pollution.*"

Slowly but surely, Daniel is winning over other naysayers as well.

"*Muchos agricultores dicen que estamos locos/Many farmers said that we were crazy,*" Daniel explains. So he had the organic fertilizer made on his farm tested. The results showed that it was top quality, containing important nutrients such as phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium.

"*Ahi se termina la palabra de locos/That's when the talk of 'crazy' ends,*" Daniel says, smiling, "*Ahi sentimos que ganamos/That's when we feel we've won.*"

THE FINCA ORGANICA APPROACH: WHAT'S WORKING

Although the battle against big monocultures – and for the health of people and planet - is far from over, Daniel, his family, and community *have* won on many levels. A cycle of sustainability on Finca Organica, a budding ecotourism project, and an organic farmers' association provide examples of the possibilities of sustainable living in cooperation with community and in harmony with the environment. Contributing factors to their success include:

- **Maintain an unclouded vision and unwavering values.** Daniel and the members of the organic farmers' association aim to keep chemicals away from their farms, families, and guests. They do not accept compromise or search for an easier way; they learn and share cost-effective and eco-friendly methods. This collective dedication has an intangible but significant value; it strengthens their relationships and in turn, their community. As Jon Hawkes states, “A shared sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with community wellbeing.”⁷⁹
- **Share the wealth.** Their approach is holistic. Hawkes identifies the four pillars of sustainability as cultural vitality, social equity, environmental responsibility, and economic viability⁸⁰. By working together toward improvements in these four areas, the organic farmers' association is creating a sustainable community. They are building strong social bonds while caring for the earth and their

⁷⁹ Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning*, 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 25.

community. They are protecting their organic farming culture, rejuvenating the land, and gradually improving their local economy. Members of the organic farmers' association exchange more than ideas; they share the environmental, cultural, and economic benefits of the project and partnerships, as they continue to practice sustainable agriculture techniques, sell organic products to CRER, and host visitors.

- **Employ tourism as a tool of sustainability.** Craig Dreeszen suggests that communities can consider stimulating cultural heritage tourism in their efforts to build creative, sustainable communities and proposes, “The same type of creative entrepreneurship that preserves local heritage, strengthens local community pride of place, and provides local economic opportunity.”⁸¹ Hosting visitors and leading organic farm tours can serve to invoke a sense of stewardship and pride in El Paraiso, creating a space for dialogue around environmental issues *and* opportunities for cultural exchange and economic growth.
- **Think big.** Meghan described El Paraiso as a “community that is thinking outside of the box.” They continue to invite innovative ideas and experiment with new techniques to protect their lands and way of life. And they are thinking more than beyond the box; they are thinking globally. “*No solo pensabamos en tener utilidades en la finca, sino tambien en poner un granito de arena para que no haiga tanta contaminacion en el planeta/We were not thinking just about getting profit to invest on our farm, but to help, even if it is just a little bit, to prevent as*

⁸¹ Craig Dreeszen, “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development,” *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economies%20(March%20'03).pdf).

much pollution (contamination) on the planet,” Daniel says, “*Porque el planeta esta tan enfermo*/Because this planet is sick (unhealthy, ill).”

- **(Re)Use what you have.** The First Nations Development Institute, in their publication on asset-building in Native communities, identify the many assets a community may possess, “acknowledging the value of not just financial capital, but also cultural and human resources.” Although they are specifically addressing Native communities for the purposes of their publication, recognition of the variety and value of tangible and intangible assets is an important part of building a sustainable community. Daniel and his family make the most out of their natural resources and their relationships. They reuse materials, such as containers, whenever possible, and the very core of the cycle of sustainability on the farm relies on plants being “recycled” by the pigs, producing fertilizer and fuel. Even the biodigester it is processed in was built by Daniel, mostly from materials he had on the farm. Daniel, his family, and the members of the organic farmers’ association share the responsibilities and the benefits, do what they can to keep their costs low and their impact minimal, and are building social and cultural capital in the process.
- **Give them reason to believe.** Many people have doubted Daniel, even accused him of being crazy. But he is steadfast in his organic agriculture practices; he continues to rejuvenate the land, produce top quality fertilizers and organic products, and constantly works to improve.

Despite being surrounded by thousands of hectares of non-organic farms, Daniel and the organic farmers' community of El Paraiso continue to grow and improve together; learning, applying, and sharing their sustainable agriculture techniques and culture with other farmers and visitors. Daniel's holistic approach has served his own farm and the community well. As he continues to use and discover new ways to care for the earth, his family, community, and all involved have the opportunity to enjoy the social bonds and the economic, environmental, and health benefits. Although it may not yet appear on any map of Costa Rica, Finca Organica is making its mark as a model of the possibilities of sustainable living - in harmony with the environment, in cooperation with the community, with respect for local culture - for the benefit of all.

Conclusion

The list of threats to sustainability - from “greenwashing” and the basic misuse and abuse of the language used to talk about it, to the tangible threats of land loss, soil and water contamination, deforestation, biodiversity and natural resource decimation, and the effects of dislocation, discrimination, political pressures, corruption, policies that prohibit cultural practices, lack of policies that protect cultural practices, lack of education, theft of resources, human rights violations, invasions, industrial intrusions, ignorance, and negligence - is immeasurable and alarming. Although the threats are diverse, many of the fundamental needs of people are similar. After studying the social movement comprised of millions of organizations working toward ecological sustainability and social justice, Paul Hawken noted that “What people want in their⁸² place is universal: security, the ability to support their families, educational opportunities, nutritious and affordable food, clean water, sanitation, and access to health care.”⁸³ If our desire to meet these needs is shared, perhaps some of our strategies can be as well.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to a more sustainable world, several similarities were found in the strategies of Don José, Meghan, Davis, and Daniel. And, as Mike Green, Henry Moore, and John O’Brien note from their experiences with the asset-based community development (ABCD) approach, “Guiding principles about how things work in communities are much more useful than a specific recipe. Principles can help you decide what is worth doing in your particular situation. People learn best how

⁸² The “their” in this case refers to human rights violations, indignities, and other threats such as those listed above.

⁸³ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, 13.

to build community partnerships from experience, by having clear principles of practice, and by getting guidance from other successful community builders.”⁸⁴ The community builders represented in the preceding chapters apply the following principles in their efforts to build sustainable communities.

Use what you have. As John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight state, “Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future.”⁸⁵ At the outset of their projects, the leaders identified the environmental, social, and cultural assets unique to their communities – including the ones that can’t be seen, such as social and cultural capital – and then found ways to use these assets to benefit the community, protect the environment, and develop income alternatives. Don José utilized the cultural resources in his family to initiate a revitalization project in El Poste that has grown and renewed what Charles David Kleymeyer refers to as “cultural energy.”⁸⁶ Meghan and Davis reused recycled materials to transform an abandoned property into an eco retreat, built connections within the community, and continue to celebrate and share the natural wealth of biodiversity and culture of Chilamate. Daniel and his family created a cycle of sustainability at Finca Organica with their emphasis on recycling and applying organic agricultural practices. Now, he is drawing on community relationships to build an agro-tourism project that will provide benefits to visitors and locals.

⁸⁴ Mike Green, Henry Moore, John O’Brien. *When People Care Enough to Act: ABCD In Action*, 17.

⁸⁵ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, Institute for Policy Research (1993), introduction available online, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/abcd/GreenBookIntro.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Charles David Kleymeyer, *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, 31-32.

Maintain a strong commitment to community. All of the project leaders make decisions with the community assets, goals, and the impact on the community in mind. They are, as Kretzmann and McKnight would say, “internally-focused.”⁸⁷ They have built strength and momentum for their projects through this commitment to the community. In spite of an internal diversity, Don José works to engage the families in El Poste in collaborative efforts to protect their land and celebrate their culture. Meghan, Davis, and Daniel share their knowledge and extend the benefits of their eco-tourism projects to their community.

Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Craig Dreeszen notes that although the focus in building creative, sustainable economies is largely on utilizing assets and building strength within their respective communities, he – and the community leaders from the previous stories – recognize that sometimes “outside expertise is needed.”⁸⁸ Each of the community leaders has welcomed training and partnerships that serve their sustainability-focused goals. Don José learned about his heritage from elders in his community and continues to work with organizations like Yanapuma Foundation that provide sustainable agriculture training and alternative income options to his community. Meghan and Davis received multiple sustainable tourism trainings from the Rainforest Alliance and continue to accept skills trainings and suggestions for improvement. Daniel also participated in sustainable agriculture courses, welcomed a variety of workshops for his community, and

⁸⁷ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, Institute for Policy Research (1993), introduction available online, <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/docs/abcd/GreenBookIntro.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Craig Dreeszen, “Building Creative Economies: The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development,” *Americans for the Arts*, accessed online January 9, 2013, [http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economics%20\(March%20'03\).pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/NAPD/files/11605/Building%20Creative%20Economics%20(March%20'03).pdf), 7.

remains open to receiving training in additional techniques of sustainable agriculture and tourism. In addition, all of these leaders look to partner with other like-minded organizations and individuals.

Use a holistic approach. In contrast to monocultures and land grabbers that focus primarily on economic gain, the project leaders in El Poste, CRER, and Finca Organica aim for holistic sustainability, concerning themselves with what Jon Hawkes identifies as the “four pillars of sustainability”: cultural vitality, social equity, environmental responsibility, and economic viability.”⁸⁹ Failing to acknowledge any of these four pillars would likely lead to an imbalance in their projects and communities. For example, if Don Jose were to dismiss sustainable agricultural practices and advocate for use of chemicals on the lands in El Poste, the contamination of the water and soil would directly impact (1) future farming of the land, thus reducing the community’s ability to produce market crops and therefore hurting the local economy, (2) native species which include medicinal plants, thus effecting the communities ability to carry out traditional healing practices and ceremonies, and (3) the health of the people. Instead, with a holistic approach, El Poste is revitalizing the culture, building social bonds, rejuvenating the land with sustainable practices and reforestation, and inviting economic opportunities. In a similar manner, Meghan, Davis, and Daniel consider the wellbeing of the environment, the economy, and the community when making decisions, as they work toward building strength, protecting the local culture and lands, and improving economic opportunities.

⁸⁹ Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s essential role in public planning*, 25.

There are no simple solutions to the complex challenges we – the planet and people – face. But there is hope in sharing and learning from the strategies that have led other soldiers of sustainability to some success.

Appendix A: Key Terms

Environmental Sustainability: Sustainability, in its most basic sense, is the ability to maintain or endure. Environmental sustainability, therefore, in its most basic sense, is the capacity of the natural world – and the resources, lands, species, and waterways within it – to endure. Of course, that capacity is not independently determined by environmental elements; it is influenced by humans’ use, abuse, respect, and neglect. Thus, an understanding of environmental sustainability must take into account mankind’s role. The United Nations definition of sustainable development – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” - is often cited in discussions of environmental sustainability⁹⁰. Taking into account both the needs of man *and* the environment, environmental sustainability can be defined as the coexistence of man and the natural world in a manner that maintains a balance; the ability of man to live in a way that allows the natural world to flourish while utilizing resources responsibly without diminishing - or worse, destroying - the environment’s capacity to renew them. When considering whether practices support or impede environmental sustainability, we must ask: How does this affect the balance? Does this practice nurture or hinder the environment’s capacity to endure? Each of the preceding chapters contain numerous examples of practices that support environmental sustainability, including the reforestation of some areas in El Poste, Meghan and Davis’s use of recycled materials, and Daniel’s multiple uses for pig manure (such as fertilizer and natural gas for cooking) that would otherwise release harmful gases into the

⁹⁰ “Our Common Future, Chapter 2: Towards Sustainable Development,” UN Documents, accessed online January 16, 2013, <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>.

atmosphere.

Cultural Sustainability: In keeping in mind the above definition of environmental sustainability, cultural sustainability can be understood as the capacity for a culture – and its traditions, practices, lands, and lifeways – to endure. Just as the environment’s capacity to endure is impacted by humans’ use, abuse, respect, and neglect, so, too, is a culture’s capacity. Practices that support cultural sustainability, therefore, are about protecting and perpetuating the elements that constitute a culture and allow for its practitioners to maintain their way of life and the traditions that are important to them. In this sense, “culture” is understood as more than specific styles of dress, dance, cuisine, and language; it can also include the broader culture and lifeways of a community, such as the small scale farming culture of El Paraiso, seen in Chapter Three. This culture has been threatened by the monoculture that has invaded the area. Some other examples of threats to cultural sustainability include discrimination, political pressures, land theft, and resulting dislocation. The Tsáchila people in El Poste, discussed in Chapter One, have been actively working to recover and sustain cultural practices and traditions that were lost over the years, due to invasions, land theft, and increased interactions with non-Tsáchila. Their cultural recovery project is another example of an effort of cultural sustainability.

Greenwashing: “Whitewashing” is a term used to describe the practice of covering up or glossing over unpleasant facts, scandals, and vices, particularly in the realm of politics. The term “greenwashing” is a play on whitewashing, and is used in an environmental

context. It is the intentional misuse of the ideas and terms associated with environmental sustainability, for the purpose of misleading consumers about the environmental practices and/or products of a company. Greenwashing comes in many forms. It may be as basic as deliberately tacking the term “eco” onto marketing materials – without actually engaging in efforts that minimize environmental impact - with the goal of creating an eco-conscious image to attract business from consumers and travelers committed to supporting companies that employ sustainable practices. Greenwashing may also be more multilayered and involve a business that actually inflicts environmental damage and then attempts to greenwash over it by claiming their care for the environment in advertising, press releases, and even signage on the property. For example, a hotel owner that clears native trees, disrupts the biodiversity of the area, and diverts a natural waterway to supply water to the hotel, but then advertises the hotel as an “eco-lodge” based on the fact that they allow guests to reuse towels and they are a few miles from a national park, is greenwashing. While reusing towels can save some energy and water, if the hotel is doing more harm than good and trying to paint over their transgressions with claims to care for the environment, their motives may be suspect.

If a company professes passion for the environment, see if their story and their actions match their claims. Some questions to consider:

- What is their history?
- What sustainable practices do they support and apply? Can you find actual examples and evidence of these practices in action or only in words?

- What companies and/or organizations do they partner with? Do they work with partners that are equally committed to sustainability? Or those that cause environmental damage?
- Is this information readily available? If you can't find what you are looking for, contact them. Are they receptive? Knowledgeable? Do they offer you examples of the ways they are engaged in efforts that protect the environment?

Appendix B: What You Can Do

If you are interested in supporting these or other soldiers of sustainability, here are some suggestions for getting started:

- *As a traveler:* **Do your research.** Find out if the places you plan to stay, tours you are interested in taking, and activities you will participate in help or hurt the community and the environment. And keep in mind, just because they describe themselves as an “eco-tour” does not necessarily mean their practices are in line with environmental and cultural sustainability. Don’t be afraid to **ask questions** before booking any of your accommodations or activities. If they are truly sustainability-minded, they are likely to be glad that you are too.
- *As a volunteer:* The above applies, plus you should be sure to inquire about the organization/project’s specific needs. And let them know what skills you are bringing. Some people assume that all non-profits and environmental or cultural projects always need volunteers. While many do, **their needs will be specific to their project and community**, and may depend on such factors as the season or the number of volunteers already on site. **Having this discussion prior to arrival** should help you and the organization assess where (and if) you are needed, so you can make the most of your time and respect theirs.
- *As a potential partner:* If you believe you or your organization may be a good

partner for a project, you should **first find out what their needs are**. If the project has a holistic approach, like those in the preceding chapters, their needs might range from something as simple as textbooks to something more involved and specific, such as training in finance, help with marketing, or providing a liaison between their project and another entity. As each project is unique, their needs will also likely be unique to their project. However, your approach as a potential partner should be the same: **supportive, not authoritative**. Reach out to them to let them know you are interested in their project and would like to support them if they are open to discussing the possibilities. Set up a meeting (an in-person meeting, if possible) to discuss their needs, what skills you can offer, any shared goals, and how you might work together for the benefit of the project. If you do begin to build a partnership, it is extremely important to **learn about the culture of the community and people you are working with**. In addition to paying respect and building relationships, it is also important to understand the dynamics of the culture and how it may influence the way the project is organized and run. **Know your boundaries**. Some communities' traditions, celebrations, songs, and even languages are considered sacred and as such, they are not shared with those outside of their culture. The cultural and/or project leader may be the best resource for advising you on this, so as to avoid any unintentional conflict. Remember **your role as a supportive partner** and find out from the community how you can best utilize your skills, networks, and resources to help them achieve their goals.

Appendix C: Contact Information

To arrange a visit to El Poste or inquire about volunteering, studying Spanish, or supporting Yanapuma Foundation, please contact:

Yanapuma Foundation

E8-125 Veintimilla y 6 de Diciembre

Quito, Ecuador

Telephone: +593 2 290 7643

Website: <http://www.yanapuma.org>

Email: spanish@yanapuma.org

To arrange a visit to the Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat or Finca Organica, please contact:

Meghan Casey & Davis Azofeifa

Chilamate Rainforest Eco Retreat

Telephone: +506 8 842 1171

Website: <http://www.chilamaterainforest.com>

Email: info@chilamaterainforest.com

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