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EVALUATION OF THE ECO-TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE NATURAL PROTECTED AREAS IN SANTA MARÍA HUATULCO, MEXICO

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This paper deals with the evaluation of the eco-tourism potential of 27 settlements located in several natural protected areas in the municipality of Santa Maria Huatulco, southern Mexico. In the first part of the study, we examine the antecedents of a project called *Huatulco communal eco-tourism corridor* (CECH, in Spanish) and the natural protected areas therein included: Huatulco National Park (PNH) and the Communal System of Protected Areas (SCAP). This is followed by the evaluation of 88 indicators associated with natural, social and economic features of the study area, in order to reveal the territorial differences within the CECH. Research results clearly reveal the presence of two types of places within CECH: those where tourism has recently been established, bringing about a booming of the local economy, and those places where this process has yet to take place.

This study examines the tourist offer in each of the 27 settlements where research was carried out, considering the parameters contained in different territorial planning instruments such as the Master Plan of the National Fund for Tourism Promotion (or FONATUR in Spanish), the Programme of Management and Conservation of the Huatulco National Park and the territorial planning of the Community Property in Santa Maria Huatulco. Huatulco is a good example of how the interests of the civil society, academics and different levels of government concur and originate a common effort in order to preserve both natural and cultural resources for tourism and to propose economic alternatives for the local population.

Huatulco stands out in Mexico as one of those places where tourism is vertebral to the local economy; the context within which this seaside resort is being developed corresponds to a larger territorial category called the *Mexican Riviera* (Sánchez-Crispín and Propin, 1996); this is revealed by different situations, for example, Huatulco is part of the

Chacahua lagoons-Huatulco eco-tourism corridor and it is one of the ports of call of cruise routes in the Northeastern Pacific (Oaxaca State Government and FONATUR, 2005). However, only a handful of settlements have successfully been inserted in the circuit of Huatulco's tourism economy, most of them are located in the so-called expropriated zone which is actually preferred by the national and international capital when it comes to decide which part of Huatulco is suitable for investment, leaving behind other places in the process (Huerta, 2003).

Natural resources in Huatulco are abundant and meaningful for their own conservation as well as for the endorsement of economic activities, among which tourism is prominent. Biodiversity; a type of tropical climate with plenty of sunshine along the year; semi-humid tropical forests and coralline systems are among those natural resources present in the study area. To this one has to add the potential for tourism coming from the presence of cultural resources such as the pre-hispanic origin of the local population, the uses and habits of the local communities and the social organizations under which many economic activities, such as agriculture, fishing, tourism and purple snail-dyeing, are sheltered.

In this context, the CECH project was designed as part of the local strategies for sustainable development that, through its principal route, links different settlements with a background on community participation projects, technical studies or training courses focused on the conservation and management of both natural and cultural resources for the encouragement of eco-tourism aiming at: the promotion of community sustainable development; the conservation of biodiversity within the natural protected area as well as in its hinterland; the start of environmental education or scientific investigation in the region and a proposal of an alternative model of tourism opposite to the conventional tourism economy already existent in the area and supported by the Mexican State.

With this background in mind, we pursued a methodology to evaluate the eco-tourism potential of the 27 settlements in the study area through the measurement of 88 indicators, clustered in three different dimensions: natural, social and economic. The assessment obtained was then referred to a scale from zero to 3, applied to each of the abovementioned settlements. The meaning of these scale values was determined arbitrarily: 1, low; 2, average; 3, high. With relation to the methodological procedure, it is pertinent to state that the selected indicators can actually be measured and compared to other eco-tourism places (at different geographical scales) or confronted, in due time, in order to establish the evolution of natural, social and economic conditions in the same places examined in this study.

Based on the methodological procedure explained above, we calculated an average value of 49 percent for the whole of the CECH area, this value is referred to the maximum possible of one-hundred percent. It is important to bear in mind that all calculated values for each of the 27 settlements are referred to this cipher of one-hundred percent. In fact, these values reveal the eco-tourism condition in each of the 27 settlements and can be compared among themselves in order to establish a hierarchy of places concerning the potential for this type of tourism. We found remarkable differences among places in the study area, once all values were calculated. This is true at both settlement and zone levels. In order to better assess the whole of eco-tourism settlements with similar conditions (similar values), we grouped them in the following categories:

I. All five eco-tourism places with the lowest calculated value are located in the Community Property area: El Hule, Las Pozas, Arroyo Xuchil, Hacienda Vieja and El Faisan, whose potential evaluation was calculated between 38 and 44 percent.
II. Eleven places make up this group, whose potential evaluation values are below the average found for the whole of the study area: Bahia Conejos, Arroyo Limon, Cruz del Monte, Todos Santos, Pueblo Viejo, El Arenoso, Bajos de Cacalutla, Bahia Cacalutla, Bahia Organo, El Limoncito and Bahia Tangolunda, with values ranking from 45 to 49 percent.
III. This group consists of places whose potential evaluation values are above average, between 50 and 54 percent. Settlements in this group are Bajos del Arenal, Piedra de Moros, Bahia Chachacual, Bahia Chahue, Bahia Maguey and La Erradura.
IV. This category comprises only one place: Bajos de Coyula with a calculated value of 55 percent.
V. Places with the highest value of potential for eco-tourism (60 to 64 percent) are: Bocana del rio Copalita, Bahia San Agustin, Bahia Santa Cruz and Santa Maria Huatulco. All 27 settlements and their corresponding values are shown on the cartographical material accompanying this paper.

Through the evaluation of the eco-tourism potential, other territorial inequalities (in the natural, social and economic scenarios as well as among the management zones in the municipality of Santa Maria Huatulco) were revealed. For example, the zone pertaining to the Community Property has a low value of eco-tourism potential (47 percent); the CONANP Polygon (containing the Huatulco National Park right in the middle of the expropriated polygon), as well as the Eastern Portion of the FONATUR zone, have a calculated value of 52 percent; finally, the Western Portion of the FONATUR zone presents a value of 53 percent.

The territorial contrasts found by this research exposed, at the local scale, five nuclei important for the diffusion of tourism in Santa Maria Huatulco. Four of them ranked high in the hierarchy based on our evaluation. Three of these places are located right on the ocean front (San Agustin, Santa Cruz and Bocana of the Copalita river); one on the mountain slope (El Faisan) and the other in mountainous interior (Santa Maria Huatulco).