

An Assessment of the Potential for Developing Ecotourism in the San Francisco Mendez Sector of El Imposible National Park, El Salvador

Kelly, Erin

El Salvador 2006-2008

University of Alaska Fairbanks - Environmental & Natural Resources

"El Imposible, the largest and most biologically diverse National Park in El Salvador, has been comanaged by SalvaNATURA, a Salvadoran environmental NGO, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment since 1991. The Park protects some of the country's few remaining sources of uncontaminated water, and serves as El Salvador's final refuge for several threatened animal species. One of the biggest challenges facing the Park's managers is that approximately 30 families inhabit the Park, 23 of which are located within the study area. With a high poverty level and few employment opportunities, the families depend on agriculture and the natural resources found within El Imposible for survival. These families inhabited El Imposible prior to it being declared a national park in 1989, and many do not have the option of relocating, if so desired, due to financial constraints.

SalvaNATURA, in recent years, has been encouraging ecotourism in the San Francisco Menéndez sector of El Imposible through the implementation of small-scale, community-based projects.

The primary aim has been to conserve and protect the Park's biodiversity, while also creating alternative forms of income generating activities for local peoples, promoting environmental education, and sustainably developing the area as an attractive tourist destination. Many of the projects have not met with success, due in part to lack of follow-up and an absence of communication between SalvaNATURA and local residents. Two essential elements of ecotourism development are community-based control and the establishment of good communication between stakeholders, both of which are lacking in El Imposible.

The goal of this research was an assessment of the potential for ecotourism development in the San Francisco Menéndez sector of El Imposible National Park based upon the attitudes and opinions of local peoples and park managers. SalvaNATURA sees ecotourism development as a viable option for El Imposible, but has failed to ask community members their opinions on the matter.

The research design included a multi-method approach, consisting of informal, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of written materials. The aim was to purposefully select community members and park managers with knowledge of the research topic, and who could best address the research questions. The researcher lived in close proximity to the residents as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer for 18 months prior to the interviews.

Research findings show that the majority of local peoples support ecotourism development in El Imposible and believe the area is an attractive tourist destination, but think there is a lack of communication and trust between the community and managers; many are convinced that SalvaNATURA does not want to work with the community. Community members are willing to work with SalvaNATURA, and believe that relations between the two groups can improve through more frequent

contact and regularly scheduled meetings. There is obvious potential for ecotourism development in El Imposible, but there are many issues that need to be addressed for it to become a reality.