

TOURISM/ECOTOURISM IN CUBA

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Cuba's economic crisis and the gradual introduction of market-oriented reforms are having a contradictory impact. These events are damaging the island's physical environment, yet simultaneously creating innovation opportunities for Cuba's environmentalists.

The economic crisis—known to Cubans as the “Special Period in Time of Peace”—has increased pressure to sacrifice environmental protection for economic profit at a time when resources to remedy existing problems are scarce. In addition, the crisis has triggered a decentralized and semi-capitalist development that is incompatible with the existing environmental regulation structure designed for a centralized, socialist economy. However, the crisis has also been the impetus for pursuing “sustainable development” in several sectors. While that rhetorical phrase serves the Cuban government's international political purpose, the term also reflects the opening of real maneuvering room for researchers and environmental activists on the island. These individuals are trying to use this space to influence a centralized system which depends on economic growth for survival. Whether the environmentalists' ideas will be incorporated into official policy remains unclear.

ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION

Cuba has two main environmental regulation problems. Economic needs frequently over-ride environmental concerns, and the centralized structure means

bureaucratic units are often responsible for ensuring their own compliance with environmental laws.

Until April 1994 the Comisión Nacional de Protección del Medio Ambiente y del Uso Racional de los Recursos Naturales (COMARNA-National Commission for Protection of the Environment and the Rational Use of Natural Resources) was the central mechanism through which all matters having an environmental impact passed. This special commission of the Council of Ministers was created in 1977. By 1980, COMARNA offices spread to every province and municipality in Cuba. In April 1994, COMARNA was officially replaced by a new Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment. Though COMARNA has been superseded, its history illustrates the challenges the new bureaucracy will face, and therefore warrants exploration.

In 1981 Law 33, titled “Ley de Protección del Medio Ambiente y del Uso Racional de los Recursos Naturales” (Law for the Protection of the Environment and Rational Use of Natural Resources) made COMARNA the governing organ. This law also made the Havana-based National Commission of COMARNA responsible for suggesting new environmental laws, and verifying that existing laws were obeyed. COMARNA was transformed into a coordinator responsible for incorporating over twenty ministries and institutions in the environmental decision making process.

1. This paper draws heavily from the author's article “Environmental Implications of Cuba's Economic Crisis,” Issue Number 8, *Georgetown University Cuba Briefing Paper Series* (July 1995).

Analysis of COMARNA as a past overseer of new construction and development illustrates the bureaucratic legacy the new Ministry has inherited. Foreign investors wishing to build hotels in Cuba had to present their ideas to the Institute of Physical Planning which suggested a site and, in most cases, had an environmental impact study performed. The proposed location of the site, the environmental impact study and construction plans were then presented to COMARNA, which reviewed the documents in consultation with environmental experts. Finally COMARNA called together a meeting of all relevant ministries and institutions to discuss the project. If all groups agreed on the final proposal, it was approved by Physical Planning and work began. If there were any insurmountable disagreements between the parties, the decision was deferred to the Council of Ministers.

In light of Cuba's economic situation, the Council of Ministers at times may have been more concerned with development than with environmental protection. This occurred, for example, in the discussion of a proposed road linking the mainland with a tourism complex in Cayo Coco. Cuban scientists insisted the road be composed mainly of bridges to permit water circulation vital to the survival of numerous species of fish, sponges and coral. The internal waters, between the archipelago and the mainland, house some of the richest bio-diversity in Cuba. The proposed road/bridges were to take an indirect route spanning gaps between naturally existing land masses.

The construction of these bridges was deemed too expensive by the Cuban government. Because an agreement could not be reached in COMARNA's meeting, the decision was deferred to the Council of Ministers. An important official then intervened pointing out that the planned road/bridge structure did not follow a direct route. The official then proceeded to take out a pen and draw a straight line from the Cayo Coco to the nearest point on the mainland. This design was adopted, and a straight, bermed road with intermittent underwater tunnels was constructed. Scientists argued that there were too few underwater tunnels to maintain natural water flows. Through negotiation, they were able to double

the number of passages, a small victory considering their original opposition to the plan.

This example illustrates that while COMARNA was able to settle minor issues, it did not possess the authority to make a final decision involving controversial matters. When a project was deemed highly attractive, the environmental protection system could be manipulated to serve a more important agenda. In this case, development and the need to attract foreign investment prevailed.

In addition to COMARNA's lack of real authority, its capability to enforce and penalize violators of environmental protection laws was dubious. In several interviews, the author was told that most violations were corrected "voluntarily" because Cuba is "a solution oriented, not penalty oriented" country. No one interviewed could cite an example of violators being taken to court and fined. The majority of Cuban enterprises were (and still are) state-operated, and a COMARNA suit against the state was inconceivable. In essence, COMARNA had no enforcement capability and its only recourse was to work through the existing structures and hope disputes could be resolved voluntarily. This obvious flaw in the system became the center of an ongoing debate, which continued after COMARNA was superseded.

When questioned in early 1994 about the apparent lack of enforcement capabilities, the National Commission of COMARNA pointed out that its staff of approximately twenty people was too small to effectively monitor compliance with regulations. Enforcement was left up to the Ministries which had "more personnel and resources." For example, the Ministry of Agriculture, which both supplied food to the population and promoted agricultural exports, was also responsible for enforcing environmental regulations governing cultivators. In effect, the Ministries were judge and jury of their own affairs.

All of these problems were discussed during interviews with Cuban specialists. They noted that, in the past, when the state was virtually the only investor, disputes were settled relatively quickly, if not necessarily equitably, within the system. However, they acknowledged that the process of "settling disputes

among ourselves” began to break down as foreign investments grew and the economic crisis intensified competition between development and environment. Many Cuban specialists suggested that the system would probably be reorganized to address these flaws.

In April 1994, the Cuban government announced the creation of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment, which replaced COMARNA. The publicly proclaimed motivation for the change was a government restructuring aimed at consolidating the activities previously performed by many separate bureaucracies into one ministry. This change reduced a large disconnected bureaucracy into a single ministry of 120 employees led by one minister, two vice ministers, eight directors, and four agency heads. It simultaneously sought to address the previous structure’s conceptual problems, including COMARNA’s obsolescence and the need for information sharing between the scientific institutes and policy makers.

The new Ministry’s structure is geared toward policy formulation, and features four agencies which provide information needed to formulate policy, then implement those policies once they are defined. The agencies are:

- **Specialized Information:** Integrates the knowledge of the scientific institutes into a central data base.
- **Science and Technology:** Responsible for the management of the scientific institutes previously affiliated with the Academy of Sciences.
- **Environment:** Incorporates the expertise of the scientific institutes to recommend policies.
- **Nuclear:** Pursues the Ministry’s agenda for nuclear research and power.

Enforcement of environmental regulations will be carried out by special Provincial Delegations which allegedly will serve as independent overseers separate from the government. Exactly how their independence will be protected is unclear. What power they

will have in future conflicts with other parts of government also remains to be clarified.

While the creation of the Ministry was announced in April 1994, it was not until January 1995 that the structure was determined. Raising the environmental issue to the ministerial level and employing “independent overseers” for enforcement purposes appears to be an important step. However, it is too early to determine the relative effectiveness of the environmental protection component of the Ministry. Further research will be needed to determine whether the Provincial Delegations are permitted to carry out their enforcement roles.

TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

Part of Cuba’s response to the elimination of Soviet subsidies has been to develop tourism as a foreign exchange generator.

Between 1990 and 1994, Cuba’s tourism grew more than 16 percent annually, compared with 4.7 percent for the Caribbean as a whole. By 1995 tourism ranked as Cuba’s second highest gross foreign exchange earner (\$1 billion for 1995) after sugar (\$1.2 billion). Despite a brief downturn following the rafters exodus in mid-1994, tourist numbers grew again—to 745,000—in 1995. Optimistically, the Cuban government announced it expects to have 50,000 hotel rooms (up from 23,255 in 1995), 2.5 million visitors and a gross revenue of 3-plus billion dollars by the year 2000.²

The main tourist centers are Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Cayo Largo, Cayo Coco, and Varadero. This growing industry has profoundly affected Cuba’s environment.

For example, the Cuban Institute of Physical Planning states that Varadero was not developed in the most environmentally sound manner. While coastal protection regulations existed, no specific laws were in place. Too many hotels were built and many were badly constructed. Hotels were established close to the beach, and inadequate space was left between buildings. In addition, the introduction of non-na-

2. This information is from a forthcoming book by Dr. Martha Honey to be published by the Sierra Club in 1997.

tive trees and plants to the area had an adverse environmental impact.

Only in the last several years has an infrastructure been created to deal with environmental issues associated with tourism. The principal motivation for change has been the realization that if Cuba does not preserve its environment, it will lose its attraction to tourists.

The Institute of Physical Planning has created a sub-group to focus on coastal development. In addition, in 1988 the National Commission of COMARNA formed a working group of coastal scientists to minimize the negative impacts of tourism development and preserve the natural surroundings. Scientific experts from the Institute of Ecology, Oceanology, and Geology have also developed programs to address beach erosion, beach regeneration and clean-up. Three years ago the Academy of Sciences created the Dirección de Recursos Naturales y Turismo (Directorate of Natural Resources and Tourism), headed by Dr. Gisela Alonso, to address the new development issues related to tourism. At about the same time Cuba also formed a National Commission on Ecotourism designed to draw on the experiences of other countries. Dr. Alonso is in contact with Costa Rican ecotourism experts and hopes to take a group of two to three Cuban scientists to Costa Rica to see their work first hand.

Already the authorities have decided that a percentage of ecotourism revenue must be spent on park infrastructure, management, and protection. Decisions on the limitation of tourist access to ecotourism sites, preparation of the sites, and development of visitor conduct manuals are also underway. As of November 1994, six sites were under consideration for ecotourism development: Ciénaga de Zapata, Sierra del Rosario, Tope de Collantes, Sierra Maestra, Guanacahabibes, and Pinares de Mayarí. To date, however, ecotourism development has been slow. Preparation of sites requires extensive scientific study, determination of pathways, hotel construction, training of guides, and education of the local population. Funding to start up all these processes simultaneously is lacking.

Whether the need to attract foreign capital will cause Cuba to sacrifice its goal of rational development in this area has yet to be determined. Presently, Cuba has neither the financing nor the construction capability to turn itself into an environmental disaster overnight. The number of proposed ecotourism sites remains small and tourist visits are limited. The current prospects for severe environmental degradation appear low. However, this could change if development plans are redesigned to maximize hard currency earnings.

CONCLUSION

Cuba is at a crossroads. The economic crisis has increased pressures to sacrifice environmental preservation for economic profit. However, that crisis has also presented opportunities for inexpensive, environmentally sound development. It is not yet clear which path Cuba will choose, but some preliminary conclusions are possible.

First, regime survival is linked to economic recovery. Therefore, the government's emphasis on economic development currently overshadows environmental protection. The government is likely to pursue environmental preservation when it is low cost and/or profitable in the short to medium term. By the same token, the government is unlikely to support preservation when it requires costly imported technology or greatly reduces the profitability of a venture.

Second, Cuba's transition to a semi-capitalist economy has rendered obsolete the past environmental regulation structure, designed for a centralized socialist economy. The creation of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment has addressed some of the conceptual problems inherent in the former structure. However, it has yet to be seen if regulations will be enforced. Without enforcement, it does not matter how many environmental protection laws are enacted.

In sum, Cuba is neither an ecological disaster area nor a paradise. Environmentally destructive decisions have been taken in some instances, while preservation concerns have won in others. Cuban experts working in the field are aware that the most critical profit versus environmental protection decisions have

yet to be made. Growing environmental awareness at the grass roots, the population's relatively high level of scientific education, the lower cost of some environmentally sound methods, and the acknowledged importance of environmental protection to long term

tourism revenues all provide limited grounds for hope. However, the economic and political forces militating against environmental protection remain formidable and should not be underestimated.