

## **Ecotourism as an Educational Experience**

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AIEA Annual Meeting Presentation, Atlanta, GA

February 24, 2009

### **Introduction**

A truly global education enables students to understand interconnections which are global in scope. Enhancing academic course work with a significant study abroad experience can enable students to move outside of self-perceived comfort zones and learn to think critically about real life issues that have global implications. Cooperative learning is increasingly utilized to facilitate this process. It is an experiential method of learning which enriches the educational process by engaging students in making a meaningful contribution to local communities for mutually beneficial results. In this context, students apply academic skills to solve real-world issues, linking established learning objectives with genuine needs.

Students lead the process, with faculty, staff, and the community as partners, applying critical thinking skills to concerns such as education, ecology, tourism, justice, and development. Cooperative learning is reciprocal; the lives of the students and the community in which they are involved are improved or empowered as a result of the experience. However, one of the challenges of implementing such a program at the graduate level is how to incorporate an international cooperative learning project within the confines of the various constraints of busy adult learners due to work, family, and time obligations.

This presentation reports the effects of a pilot test, generated by an international cooperative learning experience that focused on concepts of peace education and teaching for social and ecological justice on the ecotourism practices of the Condor Lodge Conservatory in the Apurimac Canyon in Peru. The study employed a qualitative research methodology. Through field observations, interviews, and questionnaires the research studied the involvement of local people, tourists and staff in sustainable ecotourism and conservation concepts and activities of the Condor Lodge Conservatory. The pilot test provided not only a new perspective but also a legitimization to transform the Conservatory's philosophies, practices, and research agendas toward a more educational approach for ecological justice and sustainable ecotourism practices. Results suggest that the organization lacks proper educational activities and programs, which need to be addressed if both tourists and locals are to benefit from true, responsible ecotourism practices.

### **The International Co-Op**

The definition of cooperative education provided by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE) is as follows:

Cooperative education is a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Co-op is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party.

Cooperative education (co-op) at Drexel University dates back to 1919. According to Peter Franks (2008), Executive Director and Associate Vice Provost of the Steinbright Career Development Center (SCDC) at Drexel University, "Each year, more than 9,500 Drexel students are enrolled in co-op programs and this center effectively manages more than 4,000 student placements into cooperative education work experiences". While the center had historically worked with on-campus programs, the center and Masters of Science in Higher Education Program (MSHE) collaboratively developed a fully online graduate co-op program in spring 2006 for the first MSHE cohort. In support of Drexel's strong commitment to work-integrated learning, a conceptual framework was designed for the MSHE online graduate co-op building upon cooperative education, learning simulation, and online human touch (OHT) instruction and programming. Additionally, an online master's defense was developed for MSHE students that are hosted in Second Life or Horizon Wimba. This model was used to develop the MS in Global & International Education's (GIE) Co-Op experience at Drexel University in fall 2007.

The significance of the Co-op experience is to create a bridge between college and industry that allows students to gain practical training that is formally recognized as part of their college education. It is important to note that Drexel's Co-op is based on the research literature of 'Experiential learning' or rather a structured learning sequence guided by a cyclical model of experiential learning. Less contrived forms of experiential learning (including accidental or unintentional learning) are usually described in more everyday language such as 'learning from experience' or 'learning through experience'.

As this equation suggests (*Experience + Reflection = Growth*), and as John Dewey has argued, we do not actually learn from experience as much as we learn from reflecting on experience. Reflective thinking means "turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration." Dewey insists that reflective thinking frees us from mere "impulsive" and "routine activity." "It enables us to act in deliberate and intentional fashion" to achieve what we need. This type of reflection is at the heart of GIE's International Co-Op Experience.

Additionally, those who do not reflect on their experiences instead rely on routine behavior and are guided more by impulse, tradition, and authority. They simplify their lives by uncritically accepting everyday reality. They can then concentrate their efforts on finding the most effective and efficient means to achieve ends and to solve problems that have largely been defined for them by others. In contrast, reflective practitioners actively, persistently, and carefully consider and reconsider beliefs and practices in light of the ground that support them and the further consequences to which they lead.

In the GIE international Co-Op field experience, reflective thinking allows participants to act in deliberate and intentional ways, devise new ways of acting rather than being a slave to tradition,

and interpret new experiences from a fresh perspective. Reflection with no experience is sterile and generally leads to unworkable conclusions. Experience with no reflection is shallow and at best leads to superficial knowledge. If one merely “does” her field experience without thinking deeply about it, if she merely allows the experiences to wash over her without savoring and examining it for significance, then growth will be greatly limited. The logs or journals written and kept...the questions participants try to answer and other activities in which they engage are all merely tools to facilitate reflecting thinking about the Co-Op field experience.

### **Ecotourism: What is it?**

No accepted definition of ecotourism exists (Black, 2007; Luck, 2003; Patterson, 2007). The definition depends on whom you talk to. Tour group operators, government officials, business owners, and conservationists have spent a great deal of time trying to agree on a common definition, but have failed to do so. Some people feel that nature tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism, educational tourism, and historical tourism are all parts of ecotourism; others believe that ecotourism is a separate category by itself (Patterson, 2007).

For the purposes of this presentation, ecotourism is conceptualized as a form of development that respects tradition and culture, protects and preserves the environment, educates and welcomes visitors and is economically sustainable over the long-term. What is important is that ecotourism operations are defined by their commitment to the environment, culture, nature, and education.

Additionally, according to many scholars (Black, 2007; Boo, 1990; Brandon and Wells, 1992; Stem et al, 2003; West and Brechin, 1991; Wunder, 2000), ecotourism involves a two-fold developmental goal: environmental conservation and local people benefits. The objectives of ecotourism are to provide a nature-based, environmental education experience for visitors and to manage this in a sustainable fashion. As forests become logged, as streams become polluted, and as other signs of human activity become ubiquitous, the requirements of a true ecotourism experience are increasingly difficult to fulfill. To compensate for the invasion of human disturbance, ecotourism has promoted the educational aspects of the experience. Examples include opportunities to work with researchers to collect field data in a remote area (e.g., Earthwatch) or travel with a naturalist to learn the secrets of a tropical rain forest (e.g., Smithsonian Institution travel trips). Environmental education serves to provide information about the natural history and culture of a site; it also promotes a conservation ethic that may infuse tourists with stronger pro-environmental attitudes (Black, 2007, Lowman, 2004).

### **Ecotourism and Education**

The relationship between ecotourism and education is one which is concerned with ensuring that agencies deliver effective interpretations of environmental, cultural and resource management values. Education in this context is more than just a one-way transfer of information. It is about explanation, stimulation, provocation, revelation and understanding in a manner that personally involves the ecotourist in an interesting and enjoyable fashion. This is challenging, even in face to face situations, but particularly so when operators have to rely on non-personal techniques like signage and brochures. However, this is the challenge of interpretation, and a key goal for ecotourism, i.e., to enhance people’s attitudes and actions towards their environment. In many

instances this is the major contribution of ecotourism, by exposing a wider cross-section of the community to the need to value and protect their natural and cultural areas, resources and heritage.

Ecotourism offers a great opportunity for education as well as professional and personal growth. It can help instill values in participants that will lead to serious involvement in environmental and social issues in the future. Activities can be fun and educational in the present, while building a foundation for responsible travel and tourism in the future (Black, 2007).

In essence, the international dimension of ecotourism as an educational experience is the creation of a new window from which to view the world and one's self. It's an opportunity to show the growth and development of various learning experiences and indepthly explore another country/culture and self-define by questioning one's pre-conceived values, while going beyond one's self perceived limitations.

### **The Site: The Condor Lodge Conservatory**

Located in Apurimac Canyon, Perú, the world's third largest/deepest canyon and about four hours from the former Inca capital city of Cusco, the Condor Lodge Conservatory is settled in a natural environment, facing the community of Antilla (30 kilometers away) and surrounded on all sides by an "eco-farm," with horses, cows, mules and chickens. The Conservatory, still in its first phase of development, is currently composed of one lodge constructed in eucalyptol wood and adobe and has a total capacity of twelve guests. One central lodge serves as restaurant and lounge. Since the Conservatory minimizes energy consumption, the illumination for guests is provided by an electrical generator that functions between the hours of 6 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. As of yet, there is no internet or TV cable connection, but there are future plans for having these. Water for hot showers is provided by a propane gas heater.

The community of Antilla is 12,096 feet above sea level in the Peruvian Andes. The community is an annexation of the district of Curahuasi, which represents one of the nine districts of the province of Abancay in the Apurimac region of Perú. Antilla counts about 2,000 rural inhabitants who are mainly speakers of Quechua; only a few speak Spanish. Most of the small adobe homes have dirt floors, no running water, and no in-door bathrooms. Many families share sleeping space with dozens of cuyi (guinea pigs), which scamper underfoot before becoming the family's meal. Additionally, the community is surrounded by several gold mines. Carlos Javier Alfaro, founder and director of the Condor Lodge Conservatory, pointed out his preoccupation of the impact of the mining for the mission and goals of the Condor Lodge (Interview with Urias, July, 2008). He explained that the Peruvian economy, heavily dependent upon exports of naturally occurring resources, must ensure that the use of the mining sector, as a major source of foreign exchange and industrial growth, is sustainable and does not lead to exploitation and degradation of the environment or people. The mining industry has been unregulated for decades and there are some questions as to where the liability lies for past environmental abuses, and what plans will be put in place to ensure future behavior as responsible and not environmentally damaging. Alfaro expressed his willingness to be eventually part of the assurance of these plans. The Conservatory, established in 2006, has been at the forefront of ecotourism efforts in the region, creating strong networks with local tourist agencies and international tourists, and

planning small-group tourist visits aimed at creating a harmonic relationship with the environment. Since its inception, the Conservatory has hosted several tourists from Europe, the U.S., and Australia, but has received only one student-teacher group from the U.S. during the summer of 2008 to foster an appreciation of and knowledge about ecotourism practices. Specific goals of the program included:

- Examining the history, biogeography, ecological diversity, and related social and cultural contexts of Perú;
- Increase appreciation and understanding of the culture and the people of Perú and their relationship to the land;
- Identify the impacts of human actions on the natural systems, and human responses to those changes, using the case of Perú;
- Develop an understanding of ecological education practices, integrated natural resource management, and conservation actions throughout Perú;
- Address relationships between human societies and their natural environments from multiple disciplinary perspectives;
- Develop a complex, multi-faceted and holistic view of human – environment connections that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries;
- Examine impacts of local decisions in a regional context; and
- Assist in the preservation of rare landscape elements and associated species; specifically, the Andean condor.

### **A Student's Experience**

I am very excited and grateful today to share with you a unique and productive learning experience that has impacted both my personal and professional growth. Through my Drexel co-op experience in the summer of 2008 I had the chance not only to analyze the field of ecotourism and to understand its main concepts but it was also an opportunity of constant reflection of my own experience, a reflection that started at the Condor Lodge Conservatory and continues still at the present moment shaping the view of myself in the community where I live and in the world. Let me start first with describing the site of where the co-op took place.

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space with dozens of cuyi (guinea pigs), which scamper underfoot before becoming the family's meal. Additionally, the community is surrounded by several gold mines. Carlos Javier Alfaro, founder and director of the Condor Lodge Conservatory, pointed out his preoccupation of the impact of the mining for the mission and goals of the Condor Lodge (Interview with Urias, July, 2008). He explained that the Peruvian economy, heavily dependent upon exports of naturally occurring resources, must ensure that the use of the mining sector, as a major source of foreign exchange and industrial growth, is sustainable and does not lead to exploitation and degradation of the environment or people. The mining industry has been unregulated for decades and there are some questions as to where the liability lies for past environmental abuses, and what plans will be put in place to ensure future behavior is responsible and not environmentally damaging.

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The Conservatory is blessed with great tracts of unspoiled wilderness, diverse wildlife, friendly people and peaceful conditions, not to mention the spectacular observation of the Andean Condor. Together, these natural and cultural environments created for me an exceptional educational experience. I have always had a fascination for tourism and travel and a desire for learning about the culture and the people of the place I would visit. When you wish to experience nature, wildlife and wild places often you do not think about how you might impact or worsen the degradation of those places and how you could ideally help to preserve them and help the local people.

To be fully enriching, eco travelling to faraway places encompasses interaction with the cultures and peoples that help define those places. When I visited the Condor Lodge conservatory I knew it was an eco-lodge, but I did not truly know what that meant. In the course of my stay, I learned and experienced the things that the Conservatory does to protect wildlife, the magnificent Apurimac canyon and the greater Condor observation research and that knowledge dramatically enhanced my stay and made it a truly special experience.

In the same way, knowing that my traveling was helping the people and the communities made it my time in Peru a unique and rewarding experience and therefore an enhancement.

The co-op gave me the opportunity to gain practical training and a “hands-on” experience by directly working with ecotourists and local people, but it instilled in me also a fresh perspective, a new pattern of behavior and new values for my future career in international education. Let me take this opportunity to briefly share with you my research results obtained from analyzing data from surveys and interviews. It was learned that:

In order for the Conservatory to promote the principles of responsible ecotourism with the goal of uniting conservation, area communities, and sustainable travel in the Apurimac Canyon region of Perú, the question becomes how best can the Conservatory implement an educational program based on a culture of peace and sustainable development to be offered on-site to eco-operators, tourists and the local population?

The only educational outreach program to date at the Condor Lodge Conservatory has been with the local school across the valley. If the Conservatory does not proactively identify strategies for implementing a program to educate eco-operators, tourists and the local population as to their responsibilities to environment and sustainability, then the Conservatory will not meet the objectives and principles of true, responsible ecotourism that challenge and foster sustainable development in the twenty-first century. The Conservatory attempts to take a proactive approach to environmental issues in the region of Apurimac. Priorities include preserving the wildlife and archaeological ruins of the area and in protecting the near threatened Andean condors. It should be noted that this species has a moderately small global population (less than 10,000) which is suspected to be declining significantly owing to the persecution by man. It is therefore classified as “Near Threatened” according to the 2008 IUCN Red List Category as evaluated by BirdLife International. As a result of my research, proposed conservation measures should include: a) taking census based on use of photography/video to recognize individual birds at feeding stations, b) study extent to which the Andean condor makes large-scale movements, and c) study potential impact on livestock and begin dialogue with farmers and local residents with the aim of reducing persecution.

The Condor Lodge Conservatory’s primary focus is on maintaining the integrity of the environment and its research and education programs on the Andean Condor and indigenous population. An educational plan was created for the Conservatory that adheres to the TIES principles; namely, to regulate the scale and intensity of tourism in the area and to facilitate low impact, quality interaction between Conservatory staff, local communities, and visitors.

Establishing an on-site *Center for Research and Education* is recommended. When completed, it will permit small classes and groups to stay either overnight or for long-term visits. The Center should be designed as an 'off the grid' facility. It is to be self-sustaining in regards to energy, waste management, and water. The Center will provide a learning environment where individuals will not only study issues related to sustainability and the Andean Condor, but they will be expected to live in an ecologically responsible way themselves. The Center can maximize the experiential learning possible at the Conservatory and also allow students and visitors to observe firsthand on-going research.

Through its education programs (such as: see list of examples below), the Conservatory will not only be able to provide students studying at The Center the opportunity to learn experientially and undertake research, but to establish meaningful relationships with local communities and participate in the development of the model for managing the cultural and environmental resources of the Conservatory.

In the larger arena, education at the Conservatory, with its focus on cultural and ecological sustainability and the Andean Condor, is driven by the goal of improving the quality of life among the regional people. The over-arching educational goals of projects at the Conservatory must contribute to the development of long-term productivity and sustainability for nearby communities. Through education, the Conservatory can supply the indigenous population with the opportunity to learn from the past in order to provide for a better future. Examples of such educational programming (either formal or non-formal) include:

- combining vacation with educational experiences;
- lecture tours;
- A living laboratory to enable the design of courses that include hands-on learning involving data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the Andean Condor. Because educational experiences and courses are part of a larger vision of sustaining the Conservatory, service and citizenship are also conceived as important components in most programs;
- An institutions, colleges, and universities can develop complementary research programs to those already underway or proposed at the Conservatory;
- a platform for international study abroad programs or courses for college students wanting a unique setting for both experiential and research-based activities;
- For K-12, learning opportunities to children of both Peruvian and international communities in the form of day visits, school field trips, and classroom teaching materials;
- For K-12, day programs offered by/for local and international high school groups; or
- For K-12, an environmental and cultural overnight camp program designed to meet the needs of young people in Apurimac.

### **Conclusion**

The Condor Lodge Conservatory provides a unique context for carrying out educational programs in a living laboratory or "real life" setting, which represents a powerful pedagogical method for experiencing the complexity of Andean life both past and present. This ties in with what the literature claims as an important criteria for ecotourism quality (Black, 2007; Patterson, 2003). The Conservatory is well suited for topical educational programs as well as those seeking an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the region's history, culture, and ecology. Areas of study such as ecology, biology, geology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, business, and the humanities are among the possibilities.

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The Conservatory site has the potential to host other Co-Ops.