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Rural Dominicans Launch Ecotourism Enterprises

By David Dudenhoefer

CACHOTE, Dominican Republic, May 21, 2003 (ENS) – The muffled song of a Hispaniolan trogon wafted through dense foliage high in the Dominican Republic’s Sierra de Baoruco as Maltiano Moreta focused his binoculars on that rare bird. Moreta, president of the Ecological Society in the nearby town of Paraiso, knows that the endemic trogon’s cloud forest habitat has been greatly reduced. He is consequently trying to turn Cachote’s cloud forest into a tourist attraction, so that local farmers have an incentive to protect it.

Moreta, who has been visiting Cachote for years, explained that he grew concerned about the steady destruction of the area’s forests, which provide habitat for endemic birds such as the Hispaniolan parakeet, parrot, trogon and the island’s three hummingbird species.

Watching birds in the Sierra de Baoruco (Photos courtesy D. Dudenhoefer)

He began talking to local farmers about ecotourism, and convinced one family to turn 2,000 hectares (4,942 acres) of their land into a community forest reserve. Moreta's organization obtained funding to help Cachote residents create a basic tourism infrastructure, become better prepared to accommodate visitors, and promote their area to outsiders from the Global Environment Facility’s Small Grants Programme (SGP), administered by the UN Development Programme.



“We have to find economic alternatives to take a little pressure off the forest,” he said.

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A number of Moreta's compatriots are promoting similar enterprises as a way of involving rural communities in conservation. Tourism has long been the Dominican Republic's biggest industry, with more than three million foreigners arriving each year, but most of those people are content to lounge on the island's idyllic beaches.

In recent years, though, nature and adventure tourism have drawn a growing number of visitors away from the surf and sand. The island's biggest eco-attractions are the thousands of humpback whales that winter in Samana Bay, but its forests hold an impressive array of plants and animals, including 20 endemic bird species, nearly 200 endemic reptile and amphibian species, and some 1,800 endemic plant species.

According to Bolivar Troncoso, who established the Dominican Tourism Ministry's Ecotourism Department, about half the people who visit the country engage in some sort of nature tourism. He said the activity could become a significant force for conservation in the island's interior, while benefiting some of the country's poorest communities.

Troncoso pointed out that whereas most of the beach resorts are owned by foreign companies, ecotourism has been developed almost exclusively by Dominicans.



Crossing a bridge over a Dominican stream

"The number one problem has been a lack of incentives from the state," Troncoso said, explaining that the interest on bank loans is too high for the low returns on

ecotourism investments. He said the only hope for poor communities like Cachote to get into tourism is international assistance.

If Cachote's residents are lucky, their ecotourism enterprise will be as successful as the one in Los Calabazos, a community of 200 on the Yaque River, in the country's Cordillera Central. In 1998, the Mothers Club of Los Calabazos received an SGP grant to build and equip a simple restaurant, and several years later, the Canadian nongovernmental organization Plan Nagua funded the construction

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of 10 rustic bungalows there.

On weekends and holidays, those bungalows are often fill up with visitors who hike on trails through the riparian forest and swim in the Yaque's refreshing waters. Those tourists spend about US\$8 per room and \$2 to \$4 per meal in the restaurant, and the profits are used by community groups to help the town's poorest families improve their homes and cover medical costs.

According to Alberto Sanchez, the SGP's national coordinator for the Dominican Republic, ecotourism has improved both the community's standard of living and its relationship with the environment.

"The people have a new appreciation of the forest," he said, explaining that the town's farmers have traditionally practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. "The entire community has become the principal protector of natural resources."

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