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Costa Rica License Certification for Tour Guiding

The objective of this paper is to share the efforts that a small nation like Costa Rica has made to keep the great reputation earned throughout the years about conservation and sustainability by training its tour guides -among other professionals involved in the tourism industry. Tour guides provide an interpretation of the environment, culture, landscapes, and nature of the country while at the same time being agents of change in a world that is more aware of the necessity to change human habits for a better planet. A brief introduction to Costa Rica's wealth, the resources used in the tourism industry, and the tour guide certification program will be discussed in this paper.

In a synthesis the objectives of this work are: a) to present the educational process required for obtaining a tour guides' license in Costa Rica, b) to suggest the importance of displaying a professional performance when guiding or leading trips.

Keywords: tour guide, certification, sustainability, Costa Rica.

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Introduction

Costa Rica is a nation located in the tropics of Central America. Blessed by its high biodiversity, which represents “about 505,000 species of the planets’ species, a large variety of microclimates and its complex topography, Costa Rica is recognized to be one of the leading countries in conservation throughout the world and one of the most successful nature tourism industries in the western hemisphere” (Henderson, 2002). For instance, after the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, conservationists chose Costa Rica as the headquarters of the Earth Council.

Coupled with such wealth of natural resources, the country’s identity as a peaceful Republic has helped turn Costa Rica into one of the most popular destinations for tourists, especially those from North America (USA and Canada) and Europe, who have shown an overall increase in numbers since the 1990s (ICT, 2002).

Although the country’s earned positive reputation has taken years to create, losing such prestige can be a matter of bad experiences not only by locals but from foreign tourists. Tour guides play a very important role in such reputation, as they are a critical link between the country, its guests, and their experiences; becoming a source of information and informal education. Thus, tour guides can greatly contribute to Costa Rica’s international image.

Understanding tourism “as an economic, cultural and social phenomenon that consists of a voluntary and temporary trip” (Novo, 1977), tour guides have an outstanding position to have an impact in people’s lives. Interpreting the environment, the landscapes, the people and their cultural and economic practices, as well as the use of the land and the social and environmental effect of such practice can create awareness and cause people to change their attitudes.

Besides, the very diverse target group that tour guides have access to in their job, can make the message more effective in terms of how far it can be spread. The need of a vacation is something that is not limited to specific ethnic groups or type of professional. Teachers, doctors, engineers, sociologists, biologists, white people, black people, Arabians, Asians, senior citizens, adults, teenagers, children, in fact a very wide spectrum of travelers in terms of their background, profession, geographic areas, age, etc., can be part of the same travel group. From this perspective, tour guides probably reach the most diverse group of people in their job.

Brief History of Tour Guiding in Costa Rica

One of the first mentions related to the service of guiding in Costa Rica comes from the chronics by the Spanish governor Diego de la Haya during Colonial times in 1723. Alvarado (2000, p. 22) in reference to the eruptive activity of the Irazú volcano noted:

After the third day of activity, I chose people to assess the damage by designating Captain Don Francisco Marín Lagunas... Sergeant Buenaventura de Mora, and two indigenous native from San Antonio de Cot who went exploring and opening a path to let the others pass.... As locals, the two native served as guides to the Spanish who did not know the region.

Von Seebach again would set a precedent in 1864 (Alvarado, 2000, p. 64 citing Meléndez, 1974) in one of his expeditions to Rincón de la Vieja volcano:

We continued through the main edge for short time towards the southeast, and we stopped in front of the last peak, because my guides insisted that it was impossible to go farther...

Another revealing chronic by the German Moritz Wagner during his climb to the Miravalles volcano was written in 1852 (Alvarado, 2000, p. 78, citing Meléndez, 1974):

Acompanied by four men, who knew the region, including two indians [natives], I climbed the summit of Miravalles volcano ... two of our guides that went ahead in the morning so a group of coyotes....

Wagner's description has a historic value since it is one of the few chronics that uses the term 'guide' to designate that role to a Costa Rican. During World War 1 and 2, scientific expeditions slowed down in Costa Rica, and the world, for obvious reasons.

In 1931 the National Tourism Board was founded (Junta Nacional de Turismo) but not much is known about their accomplishments and operations regarding the incorporation of guides in their plans.

The Costa Rica Institute of Tourism (ICT) was founded in 1955 and surprisingly neither the original organic law nor its first report of activities of the 1955-1956 period, suggests training personnel or guides to satisfy the domestic or international demand.

According to Luis Diego Madrigal, Director of Training Programs ACOGUITUR (personal communication, 2010), Norman Hernandez, tour guide during the 1960's referred it was through the effort of some guides that the first Union of Tour Guides was established in the 1970s. By 1971, the ICT and the National Learning Institute (INA) started efforts aimed at creating a training program that would eventually provide the legal bases to the profession of tour guiding.

Regional Efforts to Create a Training Program for Tour Guides in Central America

In 1972 Colonel Ricardo A. Porras, director of the Central American Secretary for Tourism Integration (SITCA), aware of the constant growth of regional tourism, published a document entitled “School of Tour Guides for Central America and Panama.” Such document mentioned the necessity to create in each country rector entities of tourism to train and prepare personnel to be in charge of the activity. The document provided the guidelines for the first regulation for tour guides in Costa Rica issued by ICT in 1979 (Madrigal, 2010, personal communication).

The Law N° 5947 of ICT, 1976 included in Article 38 and said:

For a better attention to the tourist, the Institute will train tour guides and will be the only one authorized to issue licenses that approve this job... Nobody can guide, if they don't have the respective license granted by the ICT.

Thus, 1976 is the official year of birth of the tour guiding activity as a profession in Costa Rica. The first course for tour guides was taught in 1978 by the National Learning Institute (INA). Such course consisted of 300 hours.

A census by the Department of Tourism Services part of ICT noted that in 1978, there were a total of 80 tour guides in Costa Rica. Today the data base of ICT (personal communication with Pablo Valverde, December, 2010) indicated that up to November 2010, there were a total of 2,332 certified guides in the country.

Education and Training for Tour Guiding in Costa Rica in the Present Days

Costa Rica through its Central and local governments, Ministry of Education as well as private companies, has made efforts to convince its population to use and preserve the resources that today represent one of the main incomes of our economy. Resources include pro-

tected areas, cultural sites, mountains, rivers, lakes, people, and all what represents the product that is offered to the tourists.

Understanding what Costa Rica does to educate and train those who interact directly with guests during their visit, will be the goal to accomplish in this section. The country aims to make all the stakeholders involved in tourism services, speak the same language of sustainability and social responsibility towards nature and the communities visited on tours. The strongest tool to make this goal true is by the Certification of Sustainable Tourism (CST). This Certification created by the Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT), requests every company that applies to be certified, to train their employees in recycling, energy saving practices, environmentally-friendly activities (e.g., reforestation, garbage collection), community development activities, among others. Tour guides are employees, and hiring certified guides is one of the requirements to obtain the CST.

In this regard, the tour guide license has been required since the 1970s, but in a very informal way. At that time having certified guides was more an individual effort by tour operators than a national commitment. It was not until the current decade that Costa Rica's Tourism Board (ICT) emphasized the importance of this and made it mandatory to become officially certified if an individual wanted to guide tours. The training required for certification is provided by the National Learning Institute (INA) and the ICT with the purpose to assure and standardize the quality of information provided by tour guides. This is of special interest to Costa Rica due to the higher number of foreigner tour guides (i.e., immigrants from other countries that engage in tour guiding without necessarily knowing the country well) that have flourished in the country in recent times. An increasing number of these speak only their foreign language and did not have any background or knowledge to show of Costa Rica to tourists. Popular account noted that this was affecting the quality of the guiding service and

even the country's reputation. According to national tourism authorities, by improving and updating knowledge and skills of tour guides, a good service would be guaranteed.

Tour Guide Rights and Obligations

On January 17th, 2003, the President of the Republic of Costa Rica, Dr. Abel Pacheco de la Espriella signed the Decree N°. 31030, in order to modify the requirements rights and obligations of tour guides in Costa Rica.

According to this decree the definition of a tour guide is one who will join the tourists to assist them and show them the tourism legacy of the country, including cultural, natural, architectural, and all forms of heritage tourism. This will be a service paid by the employer. (Chapter II, Articles 6° to 8 ° of this Decree).

Further, tour guides have by far more responsibilities than just showing the tourism legacy of the country and joining tourists during a tour. It is also part of a tour guide's responsibility to help tourists to purchase articles of quality and authenticity, protect them from any abuse from ignoring the country's law, and cooperate with the Tourism Bureau in protecting the National tourism legacy (Reformed by Decree N° 10542 on September 19th, 1979).

These are just some of the most important, out of several obligations of tour guides. In order to specify their obligations, the Institute of Tourism and the National Learning Institute have created areas of specialization in which guides can be certified on. In Costa Rica these include generalist guides, naturalist guides, adventure guides or local guides.

In order to apply for any of those areas of specialization in guiding, the rights and obligations of tour guides are joined by a series of conditions that are specified in the Costa Rica Tour Guide's Regulations. Article 9 defines who can apply to be a tour guide:

In order to aim for a tour guide license it is required to:

- a) To have Costa Rican nationality
- b) To be over 18 years old
- c) To have physical aptitude and health compatible with the job
- d) To have at least the educational level of high school or equivalent
- e) To demonstrate the ability to speak at least one foreign language and show a certification from an official institution
- f) To successfully finish the Training Program for Professional Tour Guides as specified on Chapter V of this Regulation

In order to apply for a tour guide's license, the Costa Rica Tourism Bureau (ICT) requests the following documents:

- a) A form provided by the ICT
- b) Certificate of good health condition by the Ministry of Health
- c) Certificate from the Judicial Department showing the existence of criminal records

The Program of Training of Professional Tour Guides includes a diverse number of subjects. It intends to provide tools to face trips integrated by people with different interests, background, place of origin, races, etc. It also prepares guides to manage situations of emergency, and teaches professional ethics, besides teaching them cultural, natural, political and historical facts of the country.

The training program must last a minimum of 900 hours of instructions and the professors must be professionals of recognized prestige in their specialty.

The subject matter to cover as requirements for obtaining the license is summarized below:

- a) Tourism basics: Under this program future guides will learn about history of tourism, niche markets and their expectations in order to draw an idea of what a guide can find in the real world. The infrastructure, tourist attractions' classification and negative

and positive impact of the tourism are covered also. This intends to explain how important it is to follow the guidelines of the activity to protect the activity and assure its existence for future generations.

- b) Tourism services: It covers all sort of services needed to reach the tourist expectations when traveling for vacation, health, recreation or any other reason of travel. Knowing the basics about tourism lodging, places to eat, transportation, telecommunications, health services, banks, among others, as well as the requirement to use this services is the objective of this course.
- c) National tourism legacy: Instructs prospect guides about the several tourism resources that form the tourism product and how to show tourists the importance of each one of them.
- d) Tourism legislation: Instructs about the legal consequences of the guides' or the tourists' actions and what are the procedures to follow in specific situations.
- e) Tour guides responsibilities: Reminds the guides that besides their rights there are responsibilities to meet while exercising their profession.
- f) Seminar of National tourism reality: Focuses in the present situation of tourism in Costa Rica, its achievements, benefits and challenges.
- g) History of Costa Rica: It is determined to teach guides the History of Costa Rica divided in three different periods: Pre colonial, Colonial and Post independence.
- h) Geography of Costa Rica: Hydrology, climatology and geology are some of the elements taught in this subject in reference to physical geography. The student also learns about human and economic geography, use of the land, agriculture and industry, this way they will get a complete idea of both, physical and social geography of Costa Rica. Demography, cartography and historical geography complete a full supply of tools to explain but also to move around the national territory.

- i) Literature of Costa Rica: Teaches the students about the most important Costa Rican authors and their main works published in order to provide a better idea of life in Costa Rica in past and present times and general past and modern literature of Costa Rica.
- j) Art and folklore of Costa Rica: Immerses the future guides in the unique and authentic Costa Rican traditions known from pre colonial and overall, colonial times, including the ones that last to present days and trying to rescue some that little by little are disappearing.
- k) Seminar of National cultural heritage: refers to the heritage of human being activities that have set a before and an after in the country's culture.
- l) Human relationships and professional ethics: Trains the guides in how to interact with people, how to identify potential sceneries, how to manage situations of crisis and best of all how to avoid getting to a point of crisis and instead lead the group to a desired scenery that facilitates running a tour.
- m) First aid: Trains the guides to be able to attend the first stage of an emergency and activate the system of emergency while the professional assistance arrives.
- n) Guiding techniques: This course will prepare the guides about characteristics of a guide, tourist's profiles, type of tours and groups, techniques of communication, Leading techniques, development of a tour and techniques of animation. With this tool it is expected to provide the guide with the elements to run a tour no matter what group type they are dealing with.
- o) Practice: After all the theoretical classes and field training every applicant must take a practice with a registered official tour operator to apply the knowledge gotten during this 900 hours of lessons. Then the tour operator must write a report approving or rejecting the skills of the applicant to lead tours in Costa Rica.

Based on the training program for tour guides and the curriculum of the program it is easy to see that being a tour guide in Costa Rica is an activity highly regulated. As previously indicated, the main idea is to protect the tourism industry and the tourists in order to provide them with a high quality service and attention, making them our own ambassadors.

There are two institutions that provide the schooling and teaching that are required in order to obtain the license to guide tours in Costa Rica. The National Learning Institute (Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje) and InBio (Instituto de Biodiversidad) are in charge of the instruction. Only INA can certify officially, but InBio has an agreement with INA in which the former institution is allowed to teach required courses.

The Association of Professionals in Tourism (ACOPROT) in a joint effort with the Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) and INA agreed in offering an option for those who wanted to be tour guides. The difference of this program is that unlike INA's program which is completely free, INBio's (an NGO that makes a vast effort to identify and record the species of flora and fauna of the country) tour guide program has a cost for the student. Thus, INA was chosen to teach the certification program as established by government decree, however, the Association of Professionals in Tourism (ACOPROT) facilitates and coordinates with InBio another program which is recognized by INA to teach required courses for the guiding license.

The INBio program is divided in four segments, basics of tourism that covers ethics, guiding techniques, history and types of tourism; tourist's security, oriented to first aid and CPR techniques; culture, offered by the National Museum of Costa Rica, centered in history, legacy and folklore; and biodiversity, which focuses on plants, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, insects, geography, climate and biodiversity, sustainable use of the resources, and environmental interpretation.

All of the programs include field trips as part of the subjects in order to have the students apply the knowledge acquired during their education process and to have them immerse in a similar world to the one they will be working in when they start guiding.

A third actor involved in training tour guides besides INA and InBio is the University of Costa Rica (UCR). This institution is not recognized to license tour guides as of now, however since 1992, its major in Ecotourism prepares professionals in interpretation and management of natural and cultural resources. This allows students to expand their range of action and enable them to work as tour guides. A high percentage of the graduates from this major currently work as tour guides. Due to the ample number of courses taught through an 8-semester program, the Ecological Tourism School, students and the University's authorities are asking the ICT to provide tour guides with their license automatically once the student graduates from this program. It is crucial to emphasize that this major was created originally as a response to the demand and necessity of professionals for the tourism business and conservation. The founders of this degree first looked for a career that would graduate people conscious in biodiversity and sustainability. Through the years this program has been seen as a great source of education for tour guides.

The curriculum of this 4 year bachelor's degree includes history, economy of Costa Rica, sociology, archaeology, business administration, proposal and evaluation of projects, tourism legislation, english in the social components of the career. Then subjects related to biology like taxonomy, natural history, ecology, environmental education, and geography are the courses of natural sciences. The different biology courses study amphibians, reptiles, botany, ornithology, entomology, and mammals, their characteristics and behavior.

Given the amplitude of this program, professionals in this field are not required to take all the courses offered in INA's program. Instead, students can take exams of the subjects that INA teaches , as long as those are courses that this graduates have taken in the cur-

riculum of Ecological Tourism. As it has been mentioned before, UCR students don't get the tour guide's license automatically. This agreement just aims to recognize the dedication that UCR students have put into a four-year degree program.

Initially, when ICT made the license mandatory a reaction was shown by many guides who had been working on the field for years. This guides' argument was that they could not guide multi day trips for one year if they had to attend the entire program. After negotiations the consensus was to give the opportunity to all of those that could prove had been guiding for several years could take the exam and if they passed it they did not have to take the whole course. This was smart decision as many of them are biologist, historian, geographers and they had taken several training courses even provided by the companies they worked for.

The INBio and UCR programs are usually taken by young applicants due to the number of hours needed to attend classes, since both programs require full time dedication for the training for one and four years respectively but both end up being an amazing opportunity coming from institutions dedicated to teach and to do research, offering a wide screen of source of information.

In the end the official certification is issued by the INA and is signed by both INA and the Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT) as the official institution that regulates the Tourism business in the nation.

Tourism, Diversity and Inter-Institutional Coordination for Sustainable Use of Resources

One of the commitments made by Costa Rica in signing and ratifying the "Convention of Biological Diversity" at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992 was to formulate a strategy for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

This initiative was led by the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC) of the Ministry of the Environment and Energy with technical support of the Institute of Biodiversi-

ty (INBio) and the financial support of the Global Environment Fund (GEF), through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Some of the strategies that take the tourism business in consideration are the 3rd, 6th and 13th strategies. They establish the necessary cross institutional and cross sectorial coordination for an integrated management of biodiversity as a strategic element of the country's development, as well as strengthening public awareness of biodiversity issues and strengthening national capacity for the sustainable management of biodiversity both in the public and private sectors. (MINAE, 1999) It is the private sector the one that grabs the tourism activity into the strategy for the sustainable use of biodiversity.

The three strategies need the action of the tourism authorities, private enterprise and Government to generate knowledge and transmit it to tourists. Costa Rica is making the effort to interconnect every sector implicated in tourism and sustainability and as this paper has exposed, the action is being taken from the top hierarchy of our government to the small communities and individuals, from the large development centers to the rural tourism family businesses.

Conclusions

The popularity that Costa Rica has earned since the 1990s and the reputation earned in conservation and sustainability has made it vital to assure training for the actors of this segment of the economy.

The tourism sector of Costa Rica has understood the necessity to work together with all the government institutions that regulate the activity as well as private companies and the people that provide services.

Tour guides are an imperative part, as they pass on the message of a nation of friendly people, unbelievable biodiversity, cultural wealth, and spectacular landscapes. They end up being the face of our country, the ones who interact directly with the visitors.

The Costa Rica Tourism Board (ICT), based on the diversity of profiles of guests that travel around the world, has emphasized in the fact that tour guides must be educated and trained to please such wide spectrum of people's interest. Costa Rica, through government institutions, private enterprises, non government organizations, public and private educational institutions, has set up the scene to provide the essentials to accomplish this goal. The focus of this paper was on the requirements for tour guides in achieving this.

The country's tourism authorities have designed a vast program of themes and items explained in this paper. Proposed by government decree since the 1970s, the regulations for tour guiding in Costa Rica has been modified according to each period's reality and therefore updating it to keep the quality in service.

Since 2008, ACOGUITUR emerged as a new alternative of training as a complement, not as a certification option. This Association created and today it has been taken by over 2000 people in only three years of program teaching subjects that include culture, nature, history, architecture and other topics.

ACOGUITUR (ACOGUITUR, founded in 2005) considers tour guides' opinion on necessity of education and has provided them with extra options for updating their knowledge. This Association is recognized by ICT, the National Learning Institute (INA), the National Tourism Chamber (CANATUR), University of Costa Rica (UCR), and National State University (UNED). ACOGUITUR has been recognized by the World Federation of Tour Guide's Associations, (WFTGA), being the first organization incorporated in the region.

The certification program, has induced tour guides tour guides take other options of education, which improves their performance and quality of service.

The importance of training and having professional guides is reflected in the income that tourism produces to Costa Rica's economy. Our tourism legacy produces over 2,14 billion dollars (Rojas, 2009) per year to Costa Rica's economy, reflecting 22% of the ex-

ports/services segment of the economy and one of the top places in generation of an income and employment due to its multiplying effect in the nation through work and services. Therefore the importance of emphasizing in keeping a qualified labor to offer the highest standards in a business that depends on good service to generate satisfaction and recommendations to future visitors. Tourism contributes to improve or stabilize the economy of families, communities, and nations. Nevertheless training plays an essential part on this.

In order to reach a high quality service in tours, the best performance of guiding tours involves comprehension of several sciences. However, it is not just about scientific knowledge, it is about psychology, social relations. Tour guiding is an art and education is the key to display it the best way.

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