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Anastasia Furnari, Rachel Gates, Olivia Lopez, Leon Mach
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SUSTAINING INDIGENOUS TOURISM IN BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMÁ

An assessment of Indigenous tour operators and hotel management’s perspectives

Anastasia Furnari, Rachel Gates, Olivia Lopez, and Leon Mach

33.1 Introduction

Bocas del Toro (BDT), located in north-western Panamá, is known for its diverse wildlife and unique culture. Of the province’s 125,000 residents, 18,000 reside on the archipelago’s nine most populated islands (Bourque 2016; Controlaria General de Panama: Censo 2010). These individuals comprise Panamanians of Chinese, Hispanic, and European descent, Afro-Antilleans, Indigenous Peoples, and expatriates who were incentivized to move to BDT because of Panama’s tropical climate and friendly tax policies (Spalding 2011). Tourism in the region has grown rapidly in recent decades as visitors come to experience its lush forests, breath-taking beaches, and bustling nightlife (Guerrón Montero 2011). The province’s capital on Isla Colón (known locally as Bocas Town) is well developed and serves as a hub for backpackers arriving from Panamá City and Boquete, Panamá as well as Talamanca, Costa Rica. Hostels cater to this crowd. In addition, there are 40 lodging establishments Isla Colón and about 20 other resorts and ecolodges spread throughout the archipelago for a higher-end clientele. BDT’s development can be partially attributed to government-sponsored promotional investment, which in turn encouraged foreign investment (Die 2012; Spalding 2011). Critiques suggest that wealthy and often foreign individuals have benefitted the most from the tourism boom while locals see little of the profit (Claiborne 2010).

Both the Panamanian government and international development agencies have provided funds and consultations geared towards helping Indigenous communities see profit from tourism growth on the archipelago. Several Indigenous communities have attempted to initiate community-based tourism (CBT) projects with this support, but with limited success. Tourists tend to opt for beach destinations to participate in activities like snorkelling and dolphin-watching (Sitar et al. 2017) and neglect Indigenous offerings. Indigenous People remain on the outskirts of the formalized economy in Bocas (Bourque 2016). This chapter aims to articulate disconnects between hotel operators and Indigenous tour providers to gain a deeper understanding about how and why this critical interconnection has struggled to foster sustainable Indigenous tourism enterprises locally.
There are two Indigenous groups in BDT: the Ngöbe and the Naso. Indigenous populations began moving off of the BDT archipelago and toward the Eastern Highlands of mainland Panama beginning in the 16th century when Spanish colonizers first arrived (Marín Araya 2005). In the early 20th century, the United Fruit Company (UFC) began investing in BDT by establishing banana plantations, which further reinforced the displacement of Indigenous People (Jordan-Ramos 2010). This agricultural project failed due to the proliferation of the “Panamá disease” fungus (Stephens n.d.) and Ngöbe individuals began returning from the mainland in the 1950s to occupy lands that were left unutilized after the UFC’s departure. Though promised in the 1940s, the Ngöbe were only formally granted a “comarca”—a semi-autonomous Indigenous territory—in 1997 (Mach and Vahradian 2019). The government, however, did not include the BDT archipelago in the comarca’s boundaries due to its significant economic potential (Bourque 2016). The Naso occupy the highlands closest to the Costa Rican border and are still fighting for comarca status.

BDT’s Indigenous communities most commonly practice subsistence farming and fishing, utilize medicinal plants, and build their homes out of natural, locally sourced materials. Rapid development, however, has jeopardized many Indigenous traditions. Many hotels, for example, desire to build from the same trees and palms (known locally as the Pita plant) as the Ngöbe to create an “authentic” experience for their guests, replicating the aesthetic of the Indigenous household. Many informants suggested that this demand is creating scarcity of these plants. Pollution, destruction of mangroves, and overfishing have diminished local fish stocks, furthering threatening subsistence livelihoods (Guzman et al. 2005). Developers also continue to infringe on Indigenous lands with limited recourse due to a lack of governmental oversight and the desire for the government to implement a modern land administration system where land titles are easier to buy and sell. It is not uncommon for Indigenous People to be living on untitled land that is bought out from under them by high-bidding foreigners (Thampy 2014).

Increasing the touristic value of Indigenous communities can help Indigenous People maintain or even expand their communities and territories, in order to improve their quality of life and the overall economy. Bocas’ hotels claim to better the livelihoods of Indigenous communities by hiring local people, but there is little data available on how much their programmes enhance the socio-economic status of these groups. Anecdotal evidence does suggest that some hotels do hire Indigenous People in many low-end and non-tourist facing positions (i.e., as hotel maids and kitchen staff), but that few hotels, if any, seem to be Indigenous-owned or managed. Some hotels have expressed interest in supporting Indigenous communities by organizing tours for their guests and utilizing the community-based tours are available. Many Indigenous families and community groups have developed their tourism projects in the past several decades with help from foreign NGOs but, unfortunately, visitation remains low.

Tourists visiting the main island rely on the 11 tour agencies in town for tour coordination, while those staying on outer islands frequently rely on their hotels for these services. There are two mainstream tour routes in the BDT province costing about $20 to $35. The most popular of these two tours visits Dolphin Bay (where boats stop to view the resident dolphin population), Zapatillas (an island that is part of the Bastimentos National Marine Park, known for its beach), and Coral Key (an area popular for snorkelling). The other main tour route stops at Bird Island, Bocas del Drago, and Starfish Beach (Figure 33.1). These tours allow visitors to experience BDT’s wildlife and beaches over the course of one day. In addition to these options, there are 12 CBT projects in BDT province, half of which are on the mainland (Figure 33.2). Prices for these tours vary, but tend to be more expensive.
The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that prevent successful partnerships between hotels and CBT projects in BDT. Hotels, particularly those off Isla Colón, are often charged with directly coordinating activities for their guests. Unfortunately, the repertoire of tours offered rarely includes visits to Indigenous communities, or, when they are a listed option, are not strongly supported and encouraged. By interviewing hotel management and Indigenous providers, this study hopes to discover the main barriers identified by hotels in hotel-CBT project interactions. The findings will lead us towards elucidating potential steps that both parties could take to improve this crucial dynamic and these insights may be valuable to Indigenous communities and hotel providers in other areas, with a proliferation of CBT projects struggling for market share.

33.2 Literature review

33.2.1 Community-based tourism

According to the World Tourist Organization (UNWTO), there has been continued growth in international tourist arrivals in the past decade (UNWTO 2019). Numerous Indigenous communities located in frequently visited tourism destinations have been taught to view the industry as an economic opportunity to bridge the growing gap between Indigenous communities and other socio-economic groups. The average median income of Indigenous Australians, for example, “barely reached above half that of non-Indigenous people” from 1981 to 2006 (Mitrou et al. 2014). Faced with the effects of rapid development in surrounding

Figure 33.1 Map of the two major tour routes in BDT
areas, for Indigenous communities involvement with the tourism industry may be necessary to climb the socio-economic ladder. With the perception that their Indigenous communities, natural Indigenous lands, and economies will benefit from tourism, many government authorities have endorsed community-led tourism initiatives (Coria and Calfucura 2012). The goal is sustainable CBT projects, or tourism that “centers on the involvement of the host community in planning and maintaining tourism development in order to create a more sustainable industry” (Blackstock 2005).

Because Indigenous communities traditionally maintain forests for foraging activities, it is common for CBT projects to attempt to integrate into the ecotourism industry. Ecotourism itself has grown three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole within the past few decades, a result of growing environmental awareness (Coria and Calfucura 2012). Having served as responsible stewards of the environment for generations, Indigenous populations have the knowledge to satisfy tourists seeking an ecological experience. With the goal of a successful CBT project in mind, communities must offer an attractive ecotourism product that will excite and impress potential customers. Some Indigenous-led ecotourism projects supplement their natural and adventure-based operations by integrating a cultural aspect (Fuller et al. 2005).

Blackstock’s (2005) critique of CBT suggests that programme development, more often than not, fails to focus on long-term community development and instead perpetuates long-term sustainability of the tourism industry as a whole. Internal and external factors also limit the success of CBT projects. Common internal limitations stem from existing power
structures within communities (Blackstock 2005; Fletcher et al. 2016; Coria and Calfucura 2012). Blackstock (2005) notes that Indigenous communities are not “homogenous blocks” but are full of individuals with diverse opinions and ideas. Those with less powerful positions in traditional hierarchies, she argues, may not have their best interests acknowledged. Members with subordinate statuses are more likely to be excluded from the distribution of economic gains from CBT projects (Coria and Calfucura 2012). Although tourism governance that takes into consideration the values of all members of an Indigenous community is ideal, power dynamics often hinder sharing fair and equal benefit among all members.

Along with internal struggles, external constraints are a major factor that can prevent economic sustainability. According to Fletcher et al. (2016), a lack of land rights and land management agreements can cap the potential of a CBT project. These types of barriers are prominent in Indigenous communities, as the effects of their historical displacement during times of frequent colonization can still be seen today (Bourque 2016). For communities situated within or surrounding protected areas, strict borders and restrictions on livelihood activities can impede the freedom of Indigenous People to make decisions regarding their CBT projects (Mach and Vahradian 2019). In some regions of the world, like south-east Asia, governments are purely focussed on expanding mass-tourism opportunities (Coria and Calfucura 2012). Sustaining the growth of large-scale tourist attractions depletes the natural resources on which Indigenous communities rely. With government officials promoting activities that limit CBT projects instead of supporting them, it becomes harder for communities to depend on their small-scale tourism initiatives.

### 33.2.2 Economic sustainability and Indigenous tourism

Indigenous communities developing tourism frequently face challenges surrounding a lack of economic viability, insufficient business skills and training, and strained connections to the market (Fuller et al. 2005). Therefore, these communities are often reliant on outside aid organizations for training and funding for their CBT projects. Indigenous tourism best promotes a growing economy when it does not operate based on the structure of dependency that NGO aid may foster (Giampiccoli and Hayward 2012). If the CBT project does not generate sufficient funds for both maintaining the business and benefiting the members of the community, the project will likely fail without continued investment and support from an NGO.

While CBT projects are meant to bring income into a community, there is often a lack of visitation (Ruhanen, Whitford and McLennan 2015; Stronza and Gordillo 2008). This can be due to competition from outside tourism businesses, competition with nearby CBT projects, or the remoteness of the community. Some CBT projects do not align with the demands and interests of tourists. Though many communities focus on commercializing their culture for the tourism industry, this practice can potentially stereotype communities instead of empowering them (Ryan and Aicken 2005). Another immense challenge to Indigenous tour providers is a limited connection to potential tourist clientele. While the structure of a CBT project and its internal struggles are often studied, tourist engagement and sustainability as a business is regularly neglected in CBT project literature (Schott and Nhem 2018). Without the resources for advertising or transportation, it is difficult for CBT project groups to integrate into the private sector of mainstream tourism products (Mitchell and Muckosy 2008). Therefore, groups often need help from outside sources to serve as distribution channels that bridge these gaps. A distribution channel can generally be defined as a linkage between the product and the consumer in a way that facilitates sales. These distribution...
channels are key to linking supply and demand (Pearce 2010). Distribution channels can be both direct and indirect, either connecting tourism suppliers directly with their clients or using one or more intermediaries to facilitate these connections (Schott and Nhem 2018). Intermediaries can bridge gaps in time, quantity of guests, location, and communication between groups. In BDT, a number of tour agencies and eco-resorts serve as intermediaries between Indigenous tour providers and tourists. These relationships can be mutually beneficial, but the challenges within these partnerships have gone largely unstudied in the field of CBT projects.

33.3 Methodology

33.3.1 Preliminary study

The authors conducted a preliminary study to isolate research needs in BDT related to Indigenous CBT projects. During this research phase, two authors visited each tour operator in Bocas Town to inquire about Indigenous tour offerings and their knowledge and perspectives about Indigenous tourism. Five out of the six tour agencies interviewed expressed that they did not advertise Indigenous tours and would only take clients to them by request. This suggested that in-town tour operators did not facilitate the majority of the interactions between tourists on the island and the Indigenous communities. It also demonstrated reluctance for tour operators to include Indigenous tours. Therefore, the authors focussed on hotels that had a history of bringing guests to Indigenous communities. These were typically higher-end hotels off of Isla Colon that were more eco-focused than the lodging/tour offerings on the main island. They often included “Indigenous tours” as listed attractions on their websites or advertising and facilitated Indigenous tours directly with the community instead of through a tour agency.

Researchers also completed an in-depth interview with a contractor who helped establish “Red Tu Combo,” a network of CBT projects that advertises local Indigenous tourism operations (Redtucombo 2015). This network, founded in 2000, includes a website with information about the locations of Indigenous CBT projects and the services they provide. The designer of Red Tu Combo partnered with the International Union for Conservation of Nature to create a model for Indigenous CBT projects. The goal associated with implementing CBT project infrastructure throughout the archipelago was to promote the economic gain of Indigenous communities with the increase of tourism in BDT. This interview helped collect information about each CBT enterprise and contemporary efforts to link them under a unifying umbrella to raise awareness about each individual effort.

33.3.2 Sampling technique

33.3.2.1 Overview

This case study relied on semi-structured interviews with hotel management and Indigenous providers, as well as participant observation of CBT projects. The study duration spanned all of November 2018. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow researchers to maintain consistency in their questions across interviews while also leaving space for key informants to elaborate on relevant topics (Galletta 2013). Questions for hotel management and Indigenous providers were developed based on existing CBT project literature. Interviews focussed on each project’s operation and history, perceived tourist satisfaction,
perceived demand for tours, developmental challenges, and desires for external support. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local hotel operators and tour agencies to gain their perspectives on past interactions with CBT projects and avenues for improvements that would appeal more to their guests and improve functionality. Researchers also utilized components of an auto-ethnographic technique to experience the culture of Indigenous people through a tourist’s lens (Ellis et al. 2011), recognizing their own positionality as outsiders who present similarly to the CBT project’s regular clientele. Interview data were analyzed thematically and cross-referenced with the researchers’ observations and experiences in the field, with a focus on cited challenges and potential solutions to present in this chapter.

33.3.2.2 Hotels

Researchers completed an exhaustive online search for hotels in the archipelago that advertised Indigenous tours to their guests (utilizing Google’s search engine and the key words: “lodging,” “Bocas del Toro,” “sustainability,” and “Indigenous communities”). After cross checking this list with our interview with Red Tu Combo’s founder, these hotel operators became the target informants for this article. Hotels often act as intermediaries between tourists and Indigenous CBT projects, so it is important to analyze the experiences of this stakeholder group’s interactions with Indigenous communities. Researchers discovered that most of the hotels that advertised Indigenous tours were ecolodges that attracted guests interested in nature-based tours, a category that includes many of the local CBT projects. Twenty out of 60 hotels in the archipelago advertised Indigenous tourism, but researchers found that only a portion facilitated tours to Indigenous communities. Interviews were carried out with hotel management, as they could offer the most insight about their relationships with Indigenous communities. And we were able to interview nine out of the 14 we found to actively offer Indigenous tours. Hotel owners and managers were contacted via email. Overall, researchers were able to complete seven interviews either face-to-face or over the phone. Surveys containing the same questions as the semi-structured interviews were emailed to those who could not speak to the researchers, garnering two responses.

During the interviews, hotel owners or managers were asked about their logistical experiences with contacting and scheduling tours with communities. Researchers also inquired about the popularity of Indigenous tours compared to other tours offered by the business as well as guest satisfaction with Indigenous tour participation. Further questions put an emphasis on the challenges faced and possible solutions that could strengthen the relationship with Indigenous CBT projects. Researchers encouraged interviewees to elaborate on challenges mentioned. The goal was to obtain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to these challenges. All questions were posed to gauge the overall experiences of the hotel operators, who are important facilitators in the processes of connecting tourists with CBT projects. Additionally, one face-to-face interview was completed with a local tour provider, as she had extensive insight on partnering with Indigenous CBT projects.

33.3.2.3 CBT projects

Sites were selected based on the researchers’ previous knowledge of existing CBT projects and from consultations during the preliminary research phase. Out of the 12 known CBT projects in the archipelago, researchers were able to visit seven for face-to-face interviews and tours (Table 33.1). Researchers participated in the tours in order to gain a broader
understanding of their structures, as well as the tourist experience. We disclosed both our interest in receiving a standard tour from these providers and the fact that we were conducting a study on Indigenous tourism on the archipelago. The cultural liaison of the School for Field Studies, who has ties with four of the Indigenous communities (after participating as a Peace Corps volunteer in one of them), arranged four of the interviews. These personal ties may have been beneficial to the interview process, as interviewees were comfortable sharing information about their experiences. One student researcher contacted three of the CBT project operators over social media in order to schedule the interviews and other tours.

Interviews were conducted with the tour guides, as they had the most insight about the ways in which their tours operate. Researchers started the interview by asking questions about the history and dynamics of the community’s tourism project (Appendix). The guides were then asked about the success of their CBT project, as well as overall tourist satisfaction. Researchers also focussed on the challenges of operating a CBT project and further questions looked to unpack

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the interactions between communities and hotels. Uncovering challenges from the perspective of an Indigenous tour provider was vital to understanding the factors that have an impact on community-hotel relations. Final questions addressed potential avenues of support for the community. All interview responses were transcribed and responses in Spanish were translated to English during the transcription process. Major themes were synthesized from these transcripts.

### 33.3.3 Study limitations

During conversations within Indigenous communities, interviews were held exclusively with tour guides. The guides’ perceptions of the tourism industry may not be representative of the majority of the community because of their direct involvement with the industry. Additionally, the tours arranged were with the most responsive CBT projects or with communities that had a relationship with the School for Field Studies. This selection process may have isolated communities that had limited access to communication resources. Finally, this study was conducted during the “low season” for tourism in BDT. Some hotels were closed for renovations or to allow management to travel. This greatly limited the number of high-end hotels that we were able to interview. Our two-week data collection period did not provide the flexibility to connect with every establishment.

### 33.4 Discussion and findings

#### 33.4.1 Logistical challenges

**33.4.1.1 Communication & booking**

The majority of hotel owners that were interviewed noted that the processes of booking Indigenous tours and communicating effectively with the communities were challenging. Several explained that this disconnect can deter them from recommending Indigenous community tours to their guests. One stakeholder mentioned that she had heard of a tour in which some of her guests were interested. Unfortunately, she could not find any information about booking or logistics, so she was not able to offer it to her guests. Other interviewees described instances of having success contacting a community member about a tour, but finding it difficult to ensure that the tour would be carried out on the scheduled day. “So if you say you’re going to have the tour on Wednesday, and we show up and you don’t have it, well then I’m not coming back,” explained one hotel manager.

Hotel owners and managers insinuated that they wished there was more reliability. Without this component, stakeholders became frustrated and lose interest in pursuing relationships with communities. It is important to note that many Indigenous communities in the archipelago have limited access to electricity and phone services, making it difficult to communicate with those looking to participate in their tours. One of the communities that received the most visitors per year mentioned that they have an interactive website where they keep updated announcements and contact information. Another Indigenous tourism provider uses bilingual relatives in the U.S. as the first point of contact for tourists. These relatives serve as a path through which the tourists’ desired date, time, and activities can be communicated to the provider. Access to the market by way of technology is not an option for every Indigenous tourism operation, but those that do have this privilege, such as the Oreba chocolate tour, seem to be more efficient in communicating with those interested in their tours (Table 33.1). One study has shown that direct marketing channels such as websites
are crucial for maintaining contact with entities outside the community. Direct marketing channels provide customers with details about the services offered and allow them to receive responses to inquiries they may have about booking and payment (Schott and Nhem 2018).

In order to alleviate issues that arise with coordinating tours and transportation, hotel management and Indigenous communities should collaborate to find mutually beneficial solutions. Although Indigenous community members may not have credit available on their phones, one hotel manager suggested utilizing the free application “WhatsApp” to send messages. Another strategy that has worked in the past is proactive confirmation by a hotel several days in advance of a booked tour. However, both of these suggestions rely on access to service and electricity—unreliable and often unavailable resources in Indigenous communities. Arranging a set day and time that tours are offered every week could be helpful to communities without the ability for regular communication. This strategy would also allow for consistency in advertising since the information would only have to be sent to hotels and tour agencies once.

For communities that have difficulty accessing the market, the option of a third-party provider was recommended by several hotel managers. “What we would really welcome is somebody that can sort of facilitate these types of engagements,” suggested one hotel owner, “that would be the ideal kind of person, one that has links with the local community and could communicate with us to make things happen.” Schott and Nhem (2018) classify intermediaries as indirect marketing channels that bridge the communication gap between communities and customers. These intermediaries also assist with advertising and sales promotion (Schott and Nhem 2018). One of the CBT projects we visited had a long-term intermediary from France who coordinated community tours with tourists, advertised the initiative on social media, and dispersed any outside aid that the community received. When needed, she also stood in as a tour guide. This specific community-based tour was relatively easy to schedule and activities were organized and well prepared.

The option of integrating an intermediary into a CBT project is not available to every Indigenous community, however. Only one community of those that researchers visited had access to a long-term intermediary. It would be difficult for CBT project operators to find intermediaries who are willing to invest their time in the project without financial incentive. Schott and Nhem (2018) bring to light the criticisms and conflict that may arise with intermediaries receiving payment and decreasing the profit of the Indigenous communities. These questions of ethics must be considered when discussing the positionality of intermediaries. The aforementioned intermediary also brought up the subject of dependency during the interview. She explained that at times when she was not present, those participating in the CBT project would fail to be prepared when tourists visited the community. The topic of intermediaries is complex and may not be practical for every community, but it has been shown that a balanced communicative relationship can be beneficial for an Indigenous tourism operation. This finding compels us to suggest that the formation of an NGO that acts as a clearinghouse for all Indigenous CBT enterprises in BDT might also help limit the amount of contact points and reduce complexity. Tourists could then visit this entity and hotel operators could contact this entity on behalf of its guests and use this organization directly to gather more information about all the available tours, choose one, and coordinate the visit.

### 33.4.1.2 Community accessibility

Indigenous communities in BDT are often far from lodging establishments and, therefore, long boat rides are required to reach most CBT projects. Hotel managements see this as a
burden because they feel obligated to organize transportation for their guests, requiring a significant time commitment on their part. Most Indigenous communities do not have motor boats that can travel long distances to pick up tourists from hotels. For those who do have this option, it can be difficult to find places where they can dock their boats when fetching the tourists, because businesses own all the waterfront property and few docks are open for public use. Many of the hotels on the main island look to use third-party boat drivers to transport tourists to Indigenous communities, which can incur greater costs that fall on either guests or the hotel management. Additionally, some boat drivers do not know the location of these semi-secluded communities; one Indigenous tour provider mentioned an instance of a boat driver getting lost trying to bring tourists to him. Missing the opportunity to provide tours for interested guests can have economic consequences for providers who receive little visitation already. Struggles related to transportation have been found to be a major hindrance to the success of Indigenous CBT projects in BDT.

Indigenous tours can cost more than double the price of a mainstream beach tour, so tourists may be economically discouraged. Between transportation, guide training, supplies, and general maintenance, CBT projects often cost more than popular tours, though interviews suggest that visitors often expect Indigenous tours to be inexpensive. This expectation can directly impact Indigenous CBT project visitation, as people may opt for the cheaper beach tours. A tour agency in Bocas Town mentioned that they must have four guests minimum for certain Indigenous tours in order to be profitable, and this can be difficult to achieve. This problem is not unique to Bocas; the remoteness of Indigenous communities has made it difficult for guests to access tours across the world, even when these sites are located near tourist hubs (Ashley and Roe 2002; Kontogeorgopoulos et al. 2014). Though Indigenous tours may be more expensive than the “whirlwind” beach tours, many believe that they offer a greater experience. An Indigenous provider claimed that the day after one of these fast-paced beach tours, clients can’t even remember where they went. Another informant expressed a similar thought, mentioning that each marquee site on a typical tour might function as a tour on its own and that tourists would stay in Bocas longer if activities weren’t packed into one day.

When tourists arrive at CBT projects, they may face additional setbacks. Accessibility and equipment were both cited as issues by hotel management and Indigenous providers. Many tours, such as jungle walks, can be physically demanding and require customers to be in reasonable physical condition. Disabled or elderly tourists would have difficulty participating in such tours. Often, trails can be very slick and muddy, and without proper footwear, such as rubber boots, clients may have difficulty. Furthermore, plants grow quickly in the tropics, requiring constant maintenance and a significant time investment. With infrequent visitation, Indigenous providers lack the incentive to keep these paths cleared of debris. Clearly expressing proper attire and limitations to clients before they arrive to tour is important to mitigate issues. Several hotels make boots available to their guests, knowing that Indigenous providers do not provide them. One CBT project that researchers visited had walking sticks but, generally, these items are unavailable. If hotels or CBT projects offered equipment for hikes, this detail could help open up the tours to people who would not have participated otherwise.

33.4.2 Tourism experience

Tourists’ experiences are heavily dependent upon both the service offered and the delivery of that service. Differences between the host and visitor cultures can influence overall satisfaction and therefore success.
33.4.2.1 Guide preparation

Guide training has been shown to increase the success of CBT projects. Trained guides can educate their clients on local wildlife and represent their culture while ensuring that visited areas remain protected (Howard et al. 2001). Several CBT project guides in BDT have completed training sessions provided by NGOs and the government, but the vast majority have no formal training. The majority of Indigenous providers interviewed had been formally trained in some capacity, but not recently. One informant mentioned that there was a year-long course offered in BDT last year, but only eight individuals had participated. Several Indigenous providers mentioned they have had the opportunity to visit successful CBT projects in Costa Rica and other parts of Panamá, and this strategy has allowed them to modify their own operations. However, it is unclear whether the CBT projects they visited were good models for success.

Since visitors often do not speak Spanish, it is important for guides to communicate in other languages such as English, German, and French. Without the capacity to understand, tourists’ enjoyment is diminished. Indigenous providers recognize this is a problem, claiming they will have more success if they “treat the clients well and speak their languages,” but the resources are not available to learn and practice. Sometimes third-party providers can step in; an informant mentioned, “Many guides don’t speak English, but I go and translate,” however, this option is not always available.

33.4.2.2 Gazing at poverty

A sentiment repeatedly expressed by hotels was that their guests felt uncomfortable when going on tours that observed Indigenous communities. Though walking through communities gave guests a sense of how community members live, many guests, as well as the authors, felt that viewing a community without interacting with its members created a hierarchical atmosphere. “I don’t like just people going to go see how poor people live,” one hotel owner expressed, “to me, it’s kind of like going to a zoo.” Other hotel owners expressed similar sentiments: “It’s just a bit creepy for people to walk through the villages to see people … it’s very condescending, also. They’re human beings, not animals.” This concept of “othering” the Indigenous people by displaying the community and its members as the primary tourism product has been heavily criticized across CBT literature (Ryan and Aicken 2005). Showcasing the community without engaging with them creates a sense of gazing at “human museum exhibits” (World Council of Churches 2002). Through creating this distant, hands-off relationship, Indigenous People are stripped of their humanity and instead could be seen as an extension of the exotic environment (Mowforth and Munt 2008). This concept further reinforces stereotyping of Indigenous People and contributes to the feeling of zooifying them, which can make the community feel patronized.

Rather than walking community tours, hotel owners suggested that planned, interactive activities were more desirable for guests. Organized, directed tours put the power in the hands of tour providers and imply Indigenous control of the interaction (Mowforth 2009). The most successful tour operators had organized tours or demonstrations that focussed in on one activity, such as chocolate-making, and incorporated their culture and community into these tours. Adding a hands-on element to a tour also helps hold tourists’ attention and gives them a sense of involvement and participation instead of just “looking.” Interactive elements have been added to various tours, such as making natural dyes, resulting in positive outcomes.
Additionally, hotels should educate their guests, at least briefly, on the communities they are going to tour so that they have an understanding of what they are typically going to see in such a community. Doing so will help reduce stereotyping by providing context for the communities.

33.5 Conclusion

While the tourism industry of the BDT province has grown substantially in the past few decades, Indigenous communities have faced difficulties participating in this new economy. In an effort to keep up with the booming tourism industry, CBT initiatives have been implemented across the province. These CBT projects have seen varying degrees of success. Most of them rely on intermediaries, such as hotels, to become accessible for the tourism market. Intermediary relationships are integral to the success of CBT projects in Bocas and can be beneficial for the hotel owners. However, interactions appear to be strained between these two entities because of a variety of factors. These CBT project-intermediary relationships were investigated using semi-structured interviews with hotel management and Indigenous tour providers, as well as participant observation during the tours themselves. It was determined that the primary issues preventing the success of CBT projects were communication, accessibility, organization, and cultural differences. Suggested solutions were provided by both CBT project providers and hotel owners that addressed many of these issues, such as increasing communication and reliability and bridging cultural gaps through interactive tours. It would be valuable to further explore the demand and satisfaction of the tourists in relation to Indigenous CBT projects. As tourists are the clientele that Indigenous CBT projects hope to attract, it would be beneficial to obtain their perspective on what creates a satisfactory CBT project experience.

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