

Tierra Joven, the NGO that I am now a part of, was thought up in 2000 and chartered in 2001 by my good friend and six of his best friends from college. The story of Tierra Joven and its first years is a textbook case of sharing resources, at many different levels of abstraction, spurred to action by traveling and witnessing the increasing degradation of the natural environment, and the struggle of local communities to make a living while balancing any naturally exploitative ventures against the potential ecological consequences. The charter itself was written with the help of a family friend and accomplished academic from UNAM, Dr. Jorge Serrano. Dr. Serrano's work focuses on linking disciplines together, and he shared his expertise with the 7 original founders, all of whom came from different academic backgrounds, and encouraged the group to put a practical point on their project, focusing on ecotourism.

The point of Tierra Joven was not to come into communities and bring an experiment or plan, but to go to the communities and create an informal institutional arena for facilitation and conflict resolution for analyzing the relative merits of different types of development in the creation of ecotourist infrastructure. The pilot project in the summer of 2000 was self-financed. The 7 original founders solicited contracts from 25 college-educated young Mexicans to come to Chiapas and help analyze what sort of ecotourism set-ups worked best economically, socially, and environmentally. The students self-financed their trip and were able to both share their particular academic expertise and serve as a kind of testing population for the local communities, who gained valuable insight not only from student input but also by testing out the feasibility of their infrastructure preservation plans. Together, community leaders and students tailored a program dealing with economic, social, and environmental factors as an organic whole.

This kind of work stresses the importance of connecting urban students with the natural environment and local communities, empowering the local communities through creating viable livelihoods without having to exploit their economically, but also spiritually and culturally, valuable natural environments. Students gain not only a trip to see the country and a chance to lessen the distance between their urban lives and the less developed areas of their country, but also to potentially fulfill their national service requirements of the federal government and gain valuable experience actively participating in a collaborative but potentially effective process.

A particular experience recounted to me by my friend and original founder took place in San Juan Segundo, a small ejido (indigenous) community on the Tulijá River. The students were taken from the very top of the river, an unspoiled, wild area and natural preserve dotted with small ejido communities, all the way down to the tourist infrastructure built up around the Cascadas de Agua Azul, a remarkable set of waterfalls and one of Chiapas' most famous natural attractions. The cascadas were, at the time (and likely still are), exploited heavily by the local

populations, with very little thought for the natural environment. Concrete channels were built, deepening the river and increasing erosion, as well as toilets with open pipes leading directly into the water. Trash and other negative externalities were apparent here, as well, at the furthest downriver site the students were taken to.

Upriver, in San Juan Segundo, local leaders had a sobering story to share. Years before, a government sponsored project to create palm plantations for harvesting palm oil had resulted in widespread deforestation and, eventually, to a total failure due to an inability to process the oil once collected. This textbook example of unsustainable economic development ignored the environmental and social aspects of the problem and focused narrowly on creating sustainable livelihoods, without community input. The community, therefore, had a fair sense of trepidation with trusting outside groups, which never would have come to the attention of the well-intentioned college students, trying to do what they can to help, without a receptive, open process for sharing opinions and goals which takes place before the project starts and tangible resources are shared.

The importance of what is often termed 'community buy-in' or 'local authorship' in this process, then, cannot be underestimated, and the sharing of this negative experience with previous projects enshrined authorship as a principal goal of the group's philosophy.

The group consisted of many different academic disciplines, and was lead in a very egalitarian, consensus building style. The students brought their particular academic expertise, some rudimentary gifts, and a willingness to listen and work on the sustainability of the new ecotourism industry. The local groups brought a willingness to adapt their strategies for making a living to both honor their specific beliefs about the history and spirituality of their native lands, and a commitment to finding a middle-ground which might encourage young, educated Mexicans to come to Chiapas and see the local environment, as well as spend money which can help transition local economies from purely subsistence or overly extractive exploitative processes.

For me, at this point, I think the best thing I offer is an ability to critically assess and evaluate 'sustainable' practices, and an openness to speaking in the vocabulary of local cultures to try and accomplish collaborative goals. Others would say that I bring determination and active research.

It requires a kind of commonality of purpose which cannot be produced hierarchically. The Mexican example is a great one, since the federal government has a suite of fantastic laws protecting the environment, and a constitutionally enshrined right to equal enjoyment of the environment and to equal provision of health. Despite these powerful, usually federal, policies, Mexican environmental struggles have been characterized by low-enforcement and increasing focus on tourist industry as a source of direct foreign capital which

do not require heavy industrial infrastructure investments. As in many places in the developing and developed world, the Mexican federal policies often cannot reach the places where environmental policy would be most helpful due to a lack of community buy in, often centered around the ability of the local community to make a living in a changing, ever more globalized economy. Sharing normally requires a kind of trust and authorship which horizontal and semi-formal institutions can inspire, and a commitment from regionally and philosophically diverse groups to come together to resolve problems, and to view these problems in a cumulative, non-zero-sum kind of way.

When considering resources broadly as opinions and activism, I think the greatest reinforcement will come from collapsing the distance between young, urban people and the situation in the periphery, where nature is still strong and local communities are still embedded. The shared knowledge of both kinds can be (and probably, in the end, must be, given the growing intractability of the ecological crisis) transplanted into each setting. This would mean finding ways to sustainably develop human resources while respecting natural environments, as well decentralizing local decision-making power as collaborative, horizontal associations in order to get the kind of community investment necessary, not only in the developing areas, but also to reconnect urban city-dwellers with a sense of place which is often radically missing in the perception of industrial progress projected as development by the major players in world politics.

The possibilities I see are a radically interconnected kind of community which has people in it invested in defending and preserving their natural resources, not only in an economic sense but also historically and geographically as rooted communities, able to acknowledge their dependence on and responsibility to their place as the context of their individual lives.