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From Myth to Reality: the Experience of Sustainable Tourism in the Vale Encantado Community, Tijuca Forest, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

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Abstract. Considered one of the largest urban forests in the world and the third largest in Brazil, the Tijuca Forest, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, faces the great challenge of living harmoniously and sustainably with the 46 slums located around it. One of these communities, Vale Encantado, whose occupation dates from the mid-eighteenth century, experienced the various production cycles that developed in the area, through logging, farming, livestock production, ornamental plants and black granite mining. To a greater or lesser degree, these production cycles impacted negatively on the native forest. However, simultaneously with this process, the Vale Encantado community has witnessed the implementation of reconstruction and conservation efforts of this fragment of Atlantic Rainforest, through reforestation and the creation of the Tijuca National Park in 1961. Today, through sustainable tourism and the social cuisine program, Vale Encantado has become a benchmark in the process of coexistence, integration and conservation of the local environment, and is the acknowledged “guardian of the forest.”

Keywords. Sustainable tourism, Social Cuisine, Community Development, Conservation Units, Tijuca Forest.

1 Introduction

The history of Vale Encantado is closely linked to the Tijuca Forest. Before becoming a National Park, Vale Encantado was already occupied by descendants of the old Portuguese tenants who inhabited the region and mainly grew coffee and sugar cane on their farms and smallholdings.

In the last two centuries, the forest has undergone successive production cycles. This is a story that is told today by the surrounding inhabitants and recorded on maps, books and documents.

The economic activities that have marked these production cycles considerably damaged the environment. Deforestation for logging and development of crops affected the availability and quality of water that supplied the city of Rio de Janeiro. This led emperor D. Pedro II to order in 1861 the reforestation of the area using slave labor, a process that took over 10 years.

Agriculture continued until the middle of last century, when competition with crops grown in São Paulo by Japanese

immigrants reduced local production. During this period, flower production and mining black granite of great commercial value started in Vale Encantado. The quarries using dynamite to mine granite caused serious damage to the environment, affecting the plant life and the springs that supply the community, while attracting new residents with opportunities of employment and income.

Increased environmental awareness in the 1980s and 1990s, however, led to the end of mining in the quarries. The production of flowers (especially azaleas, camellias and Agapanthus) also decreased due to competition with the cultivation of new species in the sierra regions of the state by European immigrants. The decrease in flower production and the closure of the quarries caused many residents to leave the region.

The lack of job opportunities and concerns about environmental conservation led the community to seek new opportunities for social and economic development.

The difficulties faced with the closure of the quarries, deforestation and lack of employment, as well as other reasons, such as poor sanitation, lack of street lighting, waste collection and public transport, forced the community to organize themselves into an association. Thus in 1992, AMATA—the



Figure 1. The Tijuca Forest National Park–PARNA-Tijuca–covers 3,972 hectares and is made up of six forests: Andaraí-Grajaú, Paineiras, Santa Inês, Tijuca, Gávea and Carioca. These forests have crystal clear springs and ensure a mild climate for the city, as well as providing landslide protection and flood control during heavy rains, therefore providing an important environmental service.¹

Association of Residents and Friends of Taquara do Alto da Boa Vista–was formed.

In 2005, a representative of the non-government organization (NGO) ABAQUAR/PARIS was in Brazil and identified a great potential for tourism development in Vale Encantado. The community was different from other Rio de Janeiro slums in that it was peaceful and free from drug trafficking. Added to this was the fact that Vale Encantado is located in Alto da Boa Vista, an area that is frequently visited by domestic and foreign tourists attracted by its historical and cultural features and its natural beauty (Atlantic rainforest, rivers and waterfalls). Its prime location also offers a magnificent view of Rio’s West Zone beaches.

From this approach and from the support of ABAQUAR/PARIS, the Vale Encantado ecotourism project was created. Recently, more support and other partnerships have emerged, born of the organizational skills and social mobilization of the community, from institutions like the Brazilian incubator Genesis Project of the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro–PUC/Rio–and The Ventura Institute for Sustainable Development.

The community’s dream of remaining in the location in a dignified and sustainable manner, preserving their roots and culture, found social support primarily in international cooperation and later with these Brazilian institutions. With their support, the dream has come true. Increasingly assuming the leading role as “guardian of the forest,” through the management and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources surrounding the Tijuca National Park, Vale Encantado is becoming a reference to be disseminated and replicated in other communities located around conservation units.

2 The Tijuca Forest National Park

The PARNA-Tijuca is the home to major Rio de Janeiro city attractions, such as the statue of Christ the Redeemer, the Chinese View, the Paineiras Hotel, the Sivestre restaurant, the Mayrink Chapel, the Weir Museum, etc.

The original vegetation was Atlantic Rainforest; however, due to degradation processes caused by the removal of timber for building, firewood and charcoal, and expansion of coffee plantations and other crops, this was partially destroyed. The recovery of the area took place by order of emperor D. Pedro II, who ruled that it be reforested with a rich and diverse flora of native (mimosa, centrolobium, cedar, inga, tabebuia, palm, purple glory tree, etc.) and exotic species (bamboo, breadfruit, jackfruit, jaboticaba, mango trees, etc.).

In 1991, the Tijuca Forest was registered by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage Site. A joint effort of government and the communities surrounding the park has been made by CONCA, the Alto da Boa Vista Citizenship Council, aimed at managing the coexistence of the communities with the conservation of the Tijuca National Park².

3 The Vale Encantado community

Diverse families, for example the Carvalhos, Barros and Medeiros–descendants of the old Portuguese settlers–occupied Vale Encantado. These families grew not only coffee but also greens and vegetables which supplied the smallholdings and the Alto da Boa Vista farm, with the surplus being sold in Praça 15 in downtown Rio.

Around 1950 two new income generation cycles, **growing flowers** and **Tijuca black granite** mining, began in the Valley. These were short-lived, because, unable to compete with lower prices of flowers grown by European immigrants in the Rio sierra region, flower production was halted in the 1980s. In the case of granite mining, which was more profitable and had no competition, its development was rapid, generating income and attracting new residents to the location. The black granite was rare and high quality and had great commercial value. However, once again, the activity caused serious environmental damage, leaving the land without vegetation cover and was totally prohibited in the 1990s due to environmental pressures. Many of the immigrants who lived from granite mining went in search of a better life, leaving behind the few families that were already living there and others that had put down roots in the Valley.

To solve the numerous problems that arose with the closing of the quarry, residents created **AMATA–Association of Residents and Friends of Taquara** of Alto da Boa Vista–in 1992, but six months later the association closed. The problems only increased. A legal suit by the Public Ministry for the removal of the community in 2005 caused the association to be revived. Today, AMATA plays an important part in local economic and social development on

¹ <http://www.redeprotecaopnt.org.br/parque> logged on on 30/06/2011.

² http://concacidadania.blogspot.com/2010/04/nao-remocao-de-favelas-na-globo_7038.html on 30/06/2011.



Figure 2. The environmental impact of the quarries



Figure 3. Vale Encantado today–Nature conservation

the management board of the Tijuca National Park, and one of its members is the Secretary. AMATA is one of the most active associations in Alto da Boa Vista.

A French colleague, Jerome Auriac, from the NGO ABAQUAR/PARIS, came to visit Alto da Boa Vista in a middle class neighborhood near the Vale Encantado Community. He quickly perceived the tourism potential of the community and offered two places for residents to be trained as tour guides. From this point on, residents of the community began to hold meetings and discussions to create a Social Tourism cooperative. After many meetings, they chose two persons in the community to take the course, and through Jerome's contacts and knowledge, many friends started to visit the Valley. They went for nature rambles and enjoyed a tasty lunch prepared by community women, made with products from the forest and others grown by residents.

The idea began taking form in 2007, and COOVE-RJ, the Vale Encantado Cooperative Ltd., was formed, the first social cooperative in the PARNA-Tijuca area. From this point, AMATA and Coove joined forces in search of resources to promote local social development in a sustainable manner, through various projects. Today this organization is growing and improving the quality of life of Valley residents.

4 The ecotourism and social cuisine project

In Rio de Janeiro an important social and cultural phenomenon has been developing. It is the conversion of slums into tourist destinations, as sociologist Bianca Freire-Medeiros analyzes in her book "Gringo na Laje"³ (Foreigner on a Concrete Roof). This author tells us that these slums are being promoted, sold and consumed in several ways: as a physical and/or social landscape, as an ecotourism destination, and as adventure and/or cultural tourism.

She estimates that "in Rocinha alone, five agencies (currently seven) serve together an average of 2,500 (currently estimated to be 3,500) tourists per month." In her view this phenomenon is not an isolated case, as in addition to Rocinha,

several slums in Rio de Janeiro, such as Morro dos Prazeres, Morro do Babilônia and Morro da Providencia, have already developed some kind of tourist activities.

The phenomenon that is transforming Vale Encantado into a tourist destination is no different. The proximity of the Tijuca National Park, the lush natural surroundings, and the community's social organization attract the interest of foreign and Brazilian tourists.

In this process the community identifies itself as an ecotourism destination and seeks to stimulate sustainable tourism through two main lines of action that interact with each other with a view to local development: 1) implementing nature trails, and 2) promoting local cuisine.

Through these efforts a number of initiatives are being developed within and outside the community, in search of a new model of sustainability.

4.1 Communitarian Ecotourism–Nature trails

The Valley has attracted over 1,000 tourists from different origins since it started its activity. Some important partnerships have been made with agencies and tour operators concerned with the concept of sustainability and social development. The project has three types of trails, at whose end points the community offers a tasty snack, integrating the activities developed in the community. Tourists can also obtain community products such as jams and homemade candy, as well as purchase arts and crafts.

4.2 Promoting local cuisine

The community has been developing recipes in order to make better use of products grown in kitchen gardens and those that grow naturally in the forest. With these natural ingredients they prepare delectable food items like: taro turnovers, chayote and chili jelly, jack fruit stew, jack fruit pies, heart of banana, among others. They also produce exotic juices such as chayote with mint and passion fruit with savory kale and tasty seasonal fruit cakes.

With an increasing participation in events organized by the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro/PUC-Rio, the cooperative's Social Buffet is gaining visibility,

³ Freire-Medeiros, Bianca. Gringo na Laje–production, circulation and consumption of the touristic slum. Rio de Janeiro, ed. FGV, 2009.



Figure 4. Communitarian Ecotourism–Nature trails



Figure 5. Promoting local cuisine

demonstrating its potential and economic viability, and generating income, especially for the women in the community.

These activities are supervised by successful experience of shared management of produced resources. Today Coove has 20 members that carry out the daily work and enjoys the support of other residents of the community and region.

The partnerships with national and international institutions have provided the technical skills for staff, training the chefs, waiters and tour guides, while also enabling the organization of an infrastructure capable of dealing with external services.

Other initiatives such as the establishment of a native plant nursery, an organic vegetable garden and waste recycling are being formulated and implemented. The search for alternative energy sources like the Low-Cost Solar Heater and alternative forms of waste treatment are also part of the community goals. The community has had its work widely divulged in the printed, digital and television media, demonstrating the great interest it arouses.

5 Lessons learned—an experiment that is becoming a reference

The project context is to pass on the experience gained over tens of decades by legitimate local residents of a location

forgotten by the local government, that to live and make a living for their families depends on logging and planting and activities such as the black granite mining that have degraded the environment.

These residents recovered their history and origin, almost forgotten in time. Today, the oldest members pass on to the youngest their experiences, the rights and the duties of the residents surrounding a protected area, so that in the future they are not forgotten and become hostages of real estate speculation.

In this new reality, Valley residents intend to live peacefully in the natural setting that surrounds them, making their livelihood from it without degrading it.

Much progress can be recorded, such as the conservation of the forest, soil and water, income generation, creation of job opportunities, social recognition and improved community self-esteem. But many challenges still remain for Valley residents, such as overcoming the long term problems of access to public services such as transportation, waste management, lighting, etc.

Today the cooperative is as important as the neighborhood association. The expected growth is 33.3% per year until it reaches 100% at the end of 2013, when it will become the first self-sustaining community in the area surrounding the National Park of Tijuca.

With this growth and visibility, the goal is for the Vale Encantado project to become a reference and expand to other communities of Alto da Boa Vista, generating income and stimulating development, bringing new opportunities for residents of the Valley.

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