

**The Green Republic: A Conservation History of Costa Rica, by Sterling Evans (1999) University of Texas Press: Austin, 317pp.**

**Reviewed by Susan Stonich, Department of Anthropology and Environmental Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara.**

For more than a decade, Costa Rica has been the darling of the environmental movement with an international reputation for successful conservation policies. It has been singled out as one of the world's most successful examples of rain forest conservation. With more than 25% of its national territory designated as some type of protected area (including national parks, indigenous reserves, biological reserves, national forests, and national wildlife refuges), it is widely viewed to have a national commitment to environmental conservation, especially with regard to tropical forests. Costa Rica also is characterized by more than 50 years of relative political stability as well as several decades of interest and interventions by foreign conservationists. In addition, Costa Ricans enjoy a higher quality of life and standard of living than citizens of other countries of the isthmus, according to most measures of human well being such as per capita income, education, health, nutrition, and other indicators. Costa Rica's internationally recognized conservation ethic, its relative affluence, its democratic traditions, the growing importance of tourism to its national economy, and its willingness to adopt virtually any and all conservation programs promoted by foreign experts, have led proponents to argue that Costa Rica has all the qualities necessary for successful environmental conservation.

It is in this context that Sterling Evans has written this book - a decidedly, apolitical ecological and generally optimistic history of Costa Rica's conservation efforts. From a political ecological point of view, Evans does not comprehensively confront the complex ways in which conservation efforts in Costa Rica are embedded in the web of Costa Rican politics and economy as well as being linked to the objectives and agendas of foreign interests. One of the major points of contention within the diverse field of political ecology has been the relative importance and explanatory power between structure and human agency. In this book, Evans squarely comes down on the side of human agency. In part, because of this emphasis, the book is very entertaining and easy to read, especially for those of us familiar with the history of conservation efforts in Costa Rica and the colorful individuals involved. Evans provides well-written, informative, and engaging anecdotes about many of the important people who played significant roles in the formation of Costa Rica's current conservation strategy - including Costa Rica's recent presidents, environmental leaders, and scholars. It was great fun to learn more about these individuals who have figured so prominently in efforts to promote conservation and preservation within the country.

Altogether the book affords a rosy picture of Costa Rica's achievements and future with respect to conservation. The book is divided into two parts. Part One is an ambitious effort to provide a historical description of environmental conservation in the country from the 19th century through the 1990s. It begins with a discussion of the legacy of 19th and early 20th century scientific tropical research, then goes on to summarize some of the environmental costs of agriculture as it has developed in Costa Rica - and the conservationist response through the management of public lands. Especially important is the chapter on the role national parks played in Costa Rican conservation strategies. The first section ends by emphasizing the government's efforts to restructure and decentralize conservation policies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Part Two examines various elements of Costa Rica's current conservation strategy and their relevance to the

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future, with separate chapters on environmental education, the role of non-governmental organizations, eco-tourism, and biodiversity inventory. This section and the book conclude with an extremely short chapter on the challenges currently faced by Costa Rica's conservation strategy in which human population growth is singled out as the most important threat.

Evans does a very good job intertwining the actions of many individuals, government agencies, academic institutions, and environmental groups. However, Evans' overemphasis on human agency and descriptive history leads to several major weaknesses in the book and all told the book does not realize its potential. Some major flaws in the book include the lack of an overall analytical framework; the failure to present and address a significant thesis and/or research question; the absence of a critical evaluation (in terms of success or failure) of the Costa Rican model of environmental conservation; and the failure to use the Costa Rican example to illuminate or make suggestions for conservation policies elsewhere in the region or throughout the Third World more broadly. Especially disturbing is Evans' uncritical acceptance of a number of conservation fads and initiatives that have been or are in the process of being implemented in Costa Rica. Among these are the establishment of privately owned protected areas, debt-for-nature swaps, carbon sequestration programs, biodiversity inventorying, and the Paseo Pantera (Path of the Panther)/ Mesoamerican Biological Corridor project. All of these initiatives have generated considerable controversy both within and outside of Costa Rica on ethical as well as technical grounds. The creation of parks or reserves by private wealthy individuals or foreign organizations has occurred in many areas of the country including Guanacaste and Monteverde. The appropriation of large areas of land by foreigners, even though they may be well-intentioned, has been deemed to perpetuate inequitable patterns of development, to conflict with the interests of the land-hungry poor, and as an imposition of northern ideas and interests. Debt-for-nature swaps were questioned for favoring special interests in wilderness and park preservation, for imposing northern values and conditions in Costa Rica, and as infringements on national sovereignty. Carbon sequestration and trading projects, including the US\$20 million deal between polluting U.S. companies and Costa Rica, have been termed "carbon imperialism" which give foreign corporations a license to pollute. The collaborative agreement between the pharmaceutical giant, Merck & Co. and the Costa Rican National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) a non-profit, environmental research organization, has been particularly contentious as critics have raised a number of issues related to bio-piracy and intellectual property rights. Finally, the MesoAmerican Biological Corridor project funded in part by the Global Environmental Fund of the World Bank and USAID has generated conflict and protests because of its failure to adequately take into consideration the needs and impacts of the project on local people living within the proposed corridor. Evans' failure to address the considerable controversy associated with these various initiatives is a notable gap. Similarly, recent research on the repercussions of eco-tourism on local people contradicts the overall positive assessment of the potential of eco-tourism made by Evans.

Several areas of weakness in Costa Rica's conservation policies have been pointed out by others, though not adequately addressed by Evans or integrated into his analysis. These include the dominating role of international actors and interests especially the U.S. through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), various environmental organizations, and scholars and the associated overwhelming focus on forest conservation above other areas of environmental concern. A serious bias in Costa Rica's conservation policies is its focus on biological phenomenon over the social dimensions of environmental problems. As a result, accelerating human environmental problems such as air and water contamination, inadequate sanitation, pesticide poisonings, and urban overcrowding have been given scant attention. There has been a general failure to get to the economic, social, and political roots of environmental problems and insufficient attention to the environmental and other needs of the poor. This is quite unfortunate because programs that promote social and economic well-being have been shown to positively affect environmental conservation efforts. Evans does not address these critiques nor does he integrate his work into recent thinking and practice regarding conservation - particularly

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so-called participatory and community based approaches to conservation and development.

Although entertaining, the morass of details presented in the book are not integrated into any larger analytical framework making it impossible to see the forest through the trees. Perhaps the greatest overall weakness of the book is that it does not face the unfortunate conclusion made by many of us who work in the region - that despite Costa Rica's apparent political and social advantages, the Costa Rican conservation strategy has been a failure. The fact that the model has been such a failure in Costa Rica, where it should have had the greatest chance of success, calls the model itself into question. The Costa Rican conservation model has resulted in a spatial mosaic of small, disarticulated islands of preservation (the protected areas) surrounded by vast areas of environmental degradation brought about by continued economic development initiatives that are environmentally unsound. Neither are the islands of protected areas biologically viable in the long-term. The current situation is the outcome of the basic contradiction between Costa Rica's overall development strategy and its conservation agenda - which promotes the expanded production of environmentally destructive, natural resource based commodities (e.g., bananas, coffee, a variety of non-traditional agricultural and aqua-cultural crops, and lumbering) while simultaneously delimiting islands of protected areas. Nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in the simultaneous promotion of both upscale, mass tourism (e.g., the construction of luxury beach resorts in environmentally fragile areas of the Pacific Coast) and eco-tourism destinations (e.g., in the protected areas). One of the realities that Evans does not face is that the ideology underlying Costa Rica's conservation strategy is to preserve and conserve the environment for the tourism industry (Costa Rica's greatest source of foreign exchange) - not for the sake of the environment itself. Unless this basic contradiction is resolved, Costa Rica's environmental future will encompass only a vast sea of environmental devastation.

Finally, it would be remiss not to comment briefly on Evans' facile discussion of the current challenges to Costa Rica's conservation policy included in his final chapter. In that short, undeveloped conclusion, he identifies human population growth as the primary threat to Costa Rica's environmental future. Empirical research over the last two decades clearly has demonstrated the complex linkages between population growth and environmental destruction. My own research and that of others in this area has demonstrated that if overpopulation is the underlying cause, it is the overpopulation of environmentally unsound agricultural and tourist enterprises, the overpopulation of irresponsible corporations, and the overpopulation of tourists from the U.S. and Europe that is to blame.

**Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach, Daniel Miller, Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 1997, ix + 357 pp.**

**Reviewed by Josiah McC. Heyman, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan**

Capitalism is, of course, a topic of great interest to anthropologists and other scholars. Yet our efforts in its study resemble a crowd of blind men describing an elephant by feeling its different parts (here, I speak especially of empirical research more than deductive model building). In the main, anthropologists have described those parts of capitalism having to do with