

Ecological riches, economic engines: linking tourism and science

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Once the picture starts to sharpen, the vision is breathtaking: a global network of stunning wild habitats and rich native cultures, linked by hubs of science and tourism — and all of it humming along as a profitable business enterprise.

For nearly 20 years, Hana Ayala, a former UC Irvine social ecology professor, has been working to develop her vision: transforming the ecological riches of impoverished countries into “economic engines.” High-end tourists would pay to travel these “routes of wonder,” receiving deep scientific knowledge as part of their tourist experience; the profits, in turn, would be fed back into the scientific research, broadening understanding of the natural world and jump-starting a global “knowledge economy.”



Ayala, president of a company called “Pangea World,” is attempting to create the first of these centers across the Pacific, including islands off Panama and in Fiji, and recently announced a partnership with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

And the recent economic downturn hasn't dimmed her vision in the slightest.

“The global economy is in transition to a knowledge economy,” Ayala told a gathering last month at the Beckman center on the UC Irvine campus. Dignitaries from Fiji, and Tonga, along with a variety of U.S. scientists, business leaders and entrepreneurs, listened as Ayala explained.

As she sees it, vast rainforests, or tropical islands, or spectacular coastlines are like banks — concentrations of wealth, if only the wealth can be tapped.

“These are the stocks,” she said. “These are the banks of the future. They're comparable to those countries that own oil reserves in a traditional economy.”

But those resources wouldn't be extracted or developed in the traditional way. Instead, they would be preserved. High-end, low-impact tourism would stimulate the local economy, which would employ native people in each country.

That, she believes, would provide an economic incentive to preserve wild habitat and native cultures. It would also transform the economies of the host countries, with knowledge channeled into local medicine,

agriculture, fishing and other economic activities.

She hopes the alliance of such countries could encompass the Pacific Rim, including parts of the United States such as the Orange County coast.

The knowledge-based tourism experience would be so unlike anything available today, she says, that she avoids the term “ecotourism” because it fails to capture the breadth of her concept.

She raised the example of a resort in French Polynesia.

“It's a beautiful hotel, a magnificent setting, coral reefs,” she told her audience. “You float over it, but you have no idea what you are looking at. The body is attended to, but the mind, not at all.”

The opportunity, she says, is to turn discoveries in geology, evolutionary biology and ecology into a deeply satisfying — and profitable — tourist experience.

“Compared to the pampering of the body, the pampering of the mind is in its infancy,” she says.

She calls it TCR — tourism for conservation through research.

Supporters who also spoke included Michael Clegg, the foreign secretary of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and UC Irvine Chancellor Michael Drake.

After the announcement, at a reception before a dinner, at least one of Ayala's guests expressed skepticism about whether such a business model could really succeed, though others expressed enthusiasm for it.

Ayala, wife of the famous UC Irvine evolutionary biologist, Francisco Ayala, has heard it all before. She engages her skeptical guest with the powerful charm that has fueled her efforts for nearly two decades, drawing in a large group of scientists, diplomats and business leaders from around the world.

Among the more recent converts was Visesio Pongi, a Tongan native who is director of UNESCO's Office for the Pacific States.

Pongi says he was brought into Ayala's orbit when she arrived at his office one day and would not leave until he spoke to her. He grudgingly agreed to talk to her.

“I thought, OK, five minutes would be enough,” he told the group. “She came in and sat down and it took all afternoon. No one told me how amazing she was.”