

An example of how life is changing through the impact of ecotourism development for the Warao People of the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela.

How Ecotourism is changing the lives of the Warao People in the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela.

This essay is based on my observations whilst visiting the Orinoco Region of Venezuela during February 2008 to observe interaction and the affects of tourism upon the Warao people who are indigenous to the region. I draw some conclusions but have found very little academic research to collaborate my findings with no secondary statistical evidence to support my findings. The essay is to be taken as a personal point of view, with observational and primary research.

Venezuela has few tourists compared with other South American countries and this is due mainly to the high crime rate in Caracas, perceived poor infrastructure, lack of tourism services and airlines cutting their routes to Venezuela. I have been unable to source any official government statistics on tourism arrivals in Venezuela as they are not currently being published. However, having travelled extensively around Venezuela I came across very few foreign tourists. The delta region where I was staying seemed to receive approximately 50 day trippers per day, with, on average, 10 overnight stays per night staying 1-3 nights. The visitors are mainly from Europe and the United States of America and a very tiny percentage from other regions of Venezuela. Visitors come to the region mainly to bird watch, to see wild life and to generally observe a different culture.



Traditional Warao House

My base was the Orinoco Delta Eco-Lodge, one of 4 eco-lodges (debatable) based deep within the Orinoco Delta region. The region is situated on the tropically forested

north east coast of Venezuela and is approximately the size of Belgium with the Orinoco River Delta, being longer than the Mississippi River, supporting a fragile eco-system. The region is protected by the Venezuelan National Parks Authority and administered by the Ministry of Tourism. The region is also home to several indigenous tribes, the largest tribe being the Warao People. Translated into English their name means 'the Canoe People'. This was the tribe that I visited, talked to and observed.

The Warao live deep with in the thousands of narrow jungle lined water ways of the Orinoco River, mainly along its margins and river banks. The Warao have been up until very recently totally dependent on the abundant resources of the river and the forest to survive with little assistance from the Venezuelan Government. For example, they only eat fish and never the mammals that live in the forest as they believe mammals harbour their ancestors' spirits. Such beliefs systems are still soundly practised today. Although the Warao hunt only fish and do not eat mammals they do occasionally hunt birds and mammals to sell for pets, to collectors and to tourists. The Warao are a proud and introverted people having their own medical knowledge, dances, religion and ingenious food gathering and preparation techniques. There is only one government school in the region for the Warao's children, which was still being built at the time of my visit. There is also a small school operated by the Orinoco Delta Eco-Lodge which not being used during my stay. This school is meant to be part of the Eco-Lodges contribution to the community, funded directly from tourist stays at their lodge.

The Warao still have their own language and their population is believed to be around 20,000 according to government statistics. Very few have Spanish language speaking skills but there have been in recent time's limited attempts by the government to set up small schools to provide elementary education. It is considered important for the children to learn Spanish so that they can gain employment, both in the region and else where in Venezuela. Many have already had to migrate to the cities of Venezuela, to beg and try to find some sort of meagre income to send back to their families. The Warao have in recent times been victims of logging and oil extraction in the forest which they claim has polluted their rivers and taken their land.



The Warao are a nomadic people, moving within the forest and river banks depending on the seasons. A few of the Warao in recent years have built their open sided timber homes on the main river tourist routes in order to trade with visitors. However, most choose to live deep in side the forest where all their everyday needs can be met within the boundaries of their traditions

Tourism has become an important source of income for the families that live along the river but tourists are still relevantly small in number to the region. They stay at only a hand full of (eco) lodges in the area with an estimated 30 beds each. The Delta region also receives day trippers brought up along the river in high powered speed boats from the coastal port resorts. Some of these visitors have lunch at the larger lodges and spend a little money with the Warao women and children who sell beautiful strong woven baskets and beads along the small landing docks at the lodges.

The Warao seem to have little concept of money, although now touched by modern life appreciate that money is required to provide the new essentials of life such as televisions, diesel for their new boats, fridges, clothing and basic food stuffs. They offer most of their traditional arts and crafted goods that are on sale at a cost US \$10 a piece. This is a convenient round sum and they do not like to barter. Larger baskets and some carvings can fetch higher prices in some cases. The Warao have two methods of selling their goods to tourists. Firstly, via the women and small children who paddle out to the visitors boats in their small canoes always accompanied by several other small children.



The second method is at the recent establishment of a few primitive settlements along the river banks on the main river artery. At these stop off points for visitors the visitors can watch the woman making baskets and beaded artefacts. However, there is little interaction between the Warao and the tourist, only for the selling of goods is there any verbal exchange between the two groups of people. The men do not engage in the selling activities in any way. A very few of the men work as guides, hired by the eco-lodges, as they have to be able to speak English or German and as mentioned before the Warao people usually lack even a basic knowledge of Spanish as a second language.



'Tourist Warao Village'



Warao House on River Bank

After some negotiation I was gratified the honour of being able to interview one of the tribal elders simply called 'The President'. He told me that tourism has brought benefits to his people and community. This benefit is financial only but has enabled the village to buy diesel for their electricity generator which was recently supplied by the government. The money made from tourism also helps to pay for the needs of the children in the village such as clothing and food.

He told me that the people of his village welcomed the tourist visitors who they found on whole respectful towards their culture. He said that it is by their choice to be involved within the tourism business and those of his people who do not wish to be involved are under no pressure to do so and live deeper in the forest.



'The President'

Conversely, a deep source of resentment towards tourists does exist and this is with the nuisance issue of river water washing into their homes caused by the wake of high speed motor launches used by guides to bring the tourists in from the coastal regions. This is a worsening problem. The Warao build their houses on the bank of the rivers, only a few inches above the water line, as they have done for centuries. Traditional canoes do not cause this problem nor do modern boat engines if speed restrictions were to be brought into place.



Tourist Boat Wake

The Warao are a shy and reserved people, who guard their way of life and did seem to find it difficult to integrate with the tourists. They continue to work in a dignified manner and to function in their traditional way of life and seem only have contact with visitors when endeavouring to sell crafts. A few are employed at the various eco-lodges along the river but they do not interact with the visitors except to place food on the tables. The Warao women are very modest and do not attempt to make eye contact with the visitors, making trips to the tables as brief as possible and only when essential.

A disturbing aspect of tourism that I discovered at one eco-lodge was that it was being visited via high speed launch on a daily basis by prostitutes arriving from the coastal regions. I was told by my guide that they come into the forest to find male visitors staying in the forest. This is a disturbing development because the Warao children live a very relaxed lifestyle being able to run around in an innocent and carefree way, often naked and away from their parents. This could make them very valuable to paedophile activity. Venezuela has a lucrative sex tourism industry that would appear to have now reached the Orinoco region.

Venezuela does have laws to protect indigenous communities. Articles 59 and 60 (Ministry of Tourism) requires that consultation takes place with indigenous communities before any tourism development takes place on their lands. Furthermore, a Presidential Decree 626 of 7 December 1989, "Norms on Tourist-Recreational Activity in the federal Territory of Amazonas" states that those areas used continuously or seasonally by indigenous people are to be given protection. In these areas no tourist 'activity' may be developed with the previous authorization of the Department of Indigenous Affairs and the consent of the communities. Unfortunately these regulations are routinely ignored in the Amazonas and conflict between indigenous communities and ecotourism ventures has been widely reported. (Colchester and Watson, 1995).

The tourism industry in Venezuela has been on the decline in recent years, mainly due to the high crime rate, lack of tourism infrastructure and government investment. In a report commissioned by the World Tourism Organisation, 2003 it was stated the Venezuelan government has a 'low awareness of Venezuela's ecotourism potential'. The report also states that Venezuela's greatest asset for ecotourism is with its indigenous people and their habitats. However, with an absence of a regulatory or certification system to promote a responsible ecotourism policy in the Orinoco region its people and their way of life are now under threat. The welfare of the Warao people urgently requires a monitoring program to ascertain the true environmental and social affects of tourism development in the Delta region. Also monitoring by the authorities is now required to protect the young and vulnerable children with the recent development of sex tourism in the region. It is important to mention that despite an interview at the Venezuelan Ministry of Tourism I was unable to substantiate any statistics of visitor numbers due to the Venezuelan Ministry of Tourism not currently collecting visitor numbers in the region.

Colchester M and Watson F, (1995) *Impacts of Ecotourism in Venezuela*, Planeta.com
<http://www.planeta.com/planta/95/1195ven.html>