Fox Tourism Policies Reflect Tension Between Development, Sustainability

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Fox Tourism Policies Reflect Tension Between Development, Sustainability

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2003-11-12

President Vicente Fox's administration continues to push for tourism-related development while promoting the need to protect the environment and allow local communities to determine the best use of their land. The two policies have not always been compatible, as evidenced by conflicting positions offered by the Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR) and related agencies, and by social-development advocates like Xochitl Galvez, director of the federal commission on indigenous affairs (Comision Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas, CONADEPI).

The Fox administration is keen on developing its tourism infrastructure to try to further a recovery in the influx of foreign visitors, which has not yet recovered in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on Sept. 11, 2001. SECTUR said 13.6 million foreign tourists visited Mexico in the first nine months of this year, a decline of 6.6% from the same period in 2002.

The reduction has had little impact on the sector's bottom line, which saw its earnings for January-September increase by 7% from the same period in 2002 to US$7 billion. Earnings for all of 2003 are projected at US$9 billion or more. SECTUR and the Fondo Nacional de Promocion Turistica (FONATUR) are promoting development of ski resorts, marinas, and other tourism-related projects to encourage foreigners to visit Mexico.

Faced with a proposed budget cut of 13% in 2004, SECTUR is increasingly turning to the private sector to participate in tourism projects. "Tourism is an economic activity of the highest priority and a fundamental piece of regional development," Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo told a group of business leaders in Mexico City in mid-October.

Large-scale projects conflict with sustainable development

Some in the Fox administration consider tourism an ideal vehicle to promote development in the country's impoverished areas, many of which are populated by indigenous communities. In an address to another business group in mid-September, deputy tourism secretary Emilio Goicochea Luna said the potential for tourism-related development exists in a large number of poor municipalities around the country. "Mexico has a great capacity to receive tourism-related investment in projects like marinas, condominiums, shopping centers, golf courses, hotels, and theme parks, among others," said Goicochea.

At least on paper, the administration is paying lip service to the need to balance tourism development with environmental protection, as in the Costa Maya development project, which seeks to expand the tourism infrastructure along the Cancun Corridor-Riviera Maya in Quintana Roo state. FONATUR director John McCarthy promises the Costa Maya project, which will
be launched in 2004, will ensure that urbanization and tourist activities are "compatible with environmental protection in the region." McCarthy is quick to promote the benefits of the project, which he says will result in an economic fallout of US$660 million for the region and the creation of 25,000 new jobs.

While SECTUR continues to push for development, others in the administration have pledged to protect the right of indigenous communities to determine the use of their land. Galvez said many proposals for economic development in indigenous communities are crafted with "an external vision" and not in consultation with the groups that live there. "For many years, we have viewed development as the construction of large infrastructure projects, the installation of maquiladora factories, and other forms of development foreign to the practices of the indigenous communities," said Galvez, whose position appears isolated from others in the Fox administration.

Galvez has advocated policies that allow local communities to determine how tourism will evolve on their lands. "Tourism is an alternative that could improve the quality of life for indigenous communities as long as it develops in a sustainable fashion and respects the traditions of indigenous communities and the natural resources that have been placed under their care and protection," said Galvez.

**Conflicts arise over projects in Baja California, Mexico state**

The administration’s push for tourism-related development has also raised concerns among the environmental community, especially because of the recent federal approval to proceed with the Escalera Nautica project in the Baja California Peninsula, which will develop a chain of marinas up and down the coast to attract a greater influx of pleasure boats from California.

FONATUR estimates that at least 50,000 boats will visit annually, attracting 1 million tourists and creating 250,000 jobs by 2014. The federal government is aware of opposition by environmental groups to the project. At a recent press conference in Mexico City, Environment Secretary Alberto Cardenas Jimenez said development would follow strict guidelines to make sure that "we continue conserving and protecting our rich natural resources."

Patricia Martinez, director of the wetland advocacy group Pro Esteros in Baja California, has raised concerns that a project of this magnitude will damage the peninsula’s unique desert and coastal ecosystem. "There needs to be more in-depth studies to be able to determine the environmental impact that would result from such a project," said Martinez, who represents 22 other environmental groups in the fight against the project. "If tourism increases at the rate the government is saying, a lot of species could disappear."

Environmental groups say they do not necessarily want the government to scrap the Escalera Nautica but to scale down the scope of the project significantly. These demands were backed up by the California-based environmental consulting group EDAW, which said Mexican tourism officials had exaggerated demand by up to 600%. Instead, the study recommended that any tourism investment should focus on improving facilities at ports in Ensenada, Los Cabos, San Carlos, La Paz, and Mazatlan. "The most important thing is that the project doesn't make any economic sense,"
Serge Dedina, co-director of the international conservation group Wildcoast told the Los Angeles Times.

The conflict over tourism-related development and local needs has also come into play at state and local levels. In Mexico state, for example, local residents are fighting efforts by Mexico state Gov. Arturo Montiel and Toluca Mayor Armando Enriquez to build a ski resort and golf course in the vicinity of the Nevado de Toluca, also known as the Xinantecatl Volcano. Enriquez, who took office in August, promised to create a US$1.1 billion resort with machine-made snow on the mountain, 20 km south of Toluca.

Local residents, who are descendants of Matlazinca, Mazahua, and Otomi peoples, say this kind of project would desecrate sacred land because the volcano has had a strong spiritual significance for their communities for many generations. "The God of the sky and of the earth...is a deity that we are not going to lease or sell," said Santiago Perez Alvarado, who is leading efforts to oppose the resort. "There will not be a project because the position of the residents is not negotiable." The project may not become a reality unless it receives support from the federal government because the land in question is located in a national park. Federal officials thus far have not shown any inclination to support the project. (Sources: Milenio Diario, 02/06/03; Notimex, 10/05/03, 10/14/03; Los Angeles Times, 11/08/03; La Jornada, 06/04/03, 09/17/03, 11/10/03; The Herald, 08/26/03, 08/29/03, 11/07/03, 11/10/03)

-- End --