

EX-FARC REBELS DARK-ECO TOURS: AN ATTEMPT OF REINSERTION TO SOCIETY

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Abstract:

This paper studies how after the peace agreements signed in 2016, ex FARC guerrilla members started using their jungle/nature remote places knowledge to become tour guides as a new way to make a living. With a widespread range of ecosystems, Colombia is the second most biodiverse country of the world after Brazil. From the Amazonian rainforest, Andean Mountain ranges to Pacific and Caribbean mangrove swamps, the possibilities to explore nature-based places that were previously inaccessible for tourists, researchers and even the public forces because of the conflict, became a challenging and exciting reality. The aim of this study is to analyze the recent developments of these emerging tours that attempt to provide an experience that combines dark-eco tourism perspectives and narratives, where visitors have the possibility to understand everything related to the armed conflict and difficult historical memory of violence, while also learning of the vast ecology of the areas in natural settings. The first section contextualizes the conflict with the peace agreements by analyzing emerging issues and challenges that relate to political and social discrepancies between the current government and FARC. The second section explores and relates dark-eco tourism epistemology with a tour in “La Fila” Icononzo. The third section analyses the documentary film “La Casa de la Vida” (The House of Life) that show how Colombia could benefit in a period of reconciliation from tourism initiatives. The study used a qualitative methodology based on multiple sources to collect data, the process integrates text-film analysis with ethnographic fieldwork that consisted on participatory observation and interviews.

Keywords: Dark-eco tourism, ecology, violence, difficult cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 2016, the Colombian government and FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) signed a peace deal, where 7,000 FARC members demobilized as a part of a historic armistice agreement. The document (signed in Havana Cuba), formally ended 52 years of conflict that left an estimated of 220,000 people dead and more than 7 million displaced. Because the wounds of the war are still open, the path of reconciliation and reincorporation to society of FARC has seen many obstacles, and different sectors of Colombian society have shown that they are unwilling to forgive their past of kidnapping, child recruitment, rape, killing

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and drug trafficking. Since tourism has been adopted by many ex-combatants as a way out of the conflict, the main objective of this study will be to provide a critical look (from the dark-eco tourism framework proposed) to have a better understanding of what is happening in this period of transition, because despite of the many difficulties, several communities have continued to make great efforts on the peace project.

The main objectives of the consensus were to address poverty and inequality by tackling and extinguishing the issues that had driven the war in the first place. While the rebels agreed to put down their arms, the government promised to bend long abandoned rural communities into the Colombian state: Offering jobs, infrastructure, hospitals, schools and mostly a change into a better life. Six interconnected points were at the center of the peace project: Integral comprehensive rural land reform, political participation, end of the conflict, addressing and fixing issues related to illicit drugs, consensus about the victims of the conflict (justice) and developing mechanisms of implementation, verification and reparation. The deal was established under a 15-year time frame, but after more than 5 years, many challenges remain because a lot of the aid and development that was promised has still not arrived.

Colombia's 2016 peace pact was among the most comprehensive in modern history, earning global applause and a Nobel Peace Prize for Juan Manuel Santos, then President. However, just two and half years after the agreement, some of the international actors that provided technical, humanitarian and financial resources to support peacebuilding and reconciliation, had already started to denounce that many of the promises made were not being honored, and the prospect of a true, lasting peace seemed far from uncertain. The previous president of Colombia Ivan Duque elected in 2018, left office in August 2022, being accused of obstructing the flow of the peace agreements and a devastated economy. As a right-wing conservative leader, Duque found himself in the awkward position of continuing the implementation of an accord that his political party (The Democratic Center Political Party) fiercely opposed. He defended his strategies by saying that “there was not a slow implementation, or not only we worked on the implementation but we also took decisions that will be decisive in the evolution of the agreements” (Tejada and Turkewitz, 2021). However, Duque's political party, which has long been allied with the powerful landlords had a lot to lose if the law of land property was accurately implemented, so many critical voices argue that they purposely delayed this initiative. As one of the most important elements of the peace accords, the law intends to retribute and return lands to victims of the conflict that lost everything when they abandoned rural areas, aiming to dignify the life of those that experienced trauma, displacement and violence during the war.

Some of the main issues that surfaced during Duque's administration, which was already opposing many aspects of the peace agreements even before being elected, were connected to what his party continuously claimed as giving light sentences to criminals with immunity and a lack of justice. For example, the Marxist National Liberation Army (ELN), another rebel group with a long history in Colombia that was in peace talks with the previous government, suffered the consequences of a firm hand strategy implemented by Duque's government, as they were left out of the peace project circle. Overall, the implementation of the peace agreements during Duque's presidency was one of the most contentious issues among Colombian society, because since he was elected, under the promise of tougher measures towards the demobilized FARC and any illegal armed group, his administration started to breach the pacts in multiple fronts. Situation that resulted on intermissions in government

fundings to implement economic projects (that had already started), meaning that many of the demobilized fighters were not able to integrate to society because of the blockages imposed.

However, not everything has been negative. According to the last report of the United Nations, “since 2016 more than 13.608 ex fighters have been accredited to the process trying to reintegrate to society, changing weapons for a more peaceful lifestyle: 99 collective productive projects, 3,190 individual projects and 155 functional cooperatives have been established all along the country” (Vanegas, 2022). The agreement also established an ambitious transnational justice tribunal (JEP-Special Jurisdiction for Peace)² that investigates war crimes and prosecutes perpetrators, aiming to repair the victims. This was the first time that the two parties agreed on the creation of a special tribunal that, despite many obstacles, has advanced on specific important areas such as bringing some truth and justice to the families of the victims.

The design of the peace agreement also transformed the government's public approach, focusing on the local areas mostly affected by the violence of the conflict in a highly centralized country. Importantly, one of the main features of the accords is that it promotes the active participation of civil society to enhance the legitimacy of the process to increase the public confidence in it, especially at the territorial level. Despite the violence that continues to affect many rural areas, Colombia has managed to establish a tradition of peace building and reconciliation at the local and community level. There are hundreds of locally established organizations that promote peace as a strategy, that many civilians and ex FARC rebels not only developed to protect themselves from violent armed actors, but also to reintegrate into society and live a better life.

This study main task is then to analyze two different perspectives of peace and reinsertion to society that are tourism oriented: the ETCR³ of Icononzo and the impact of the Colombia Bio expeditions in Anori. Importantly, both initiatives intend to promote and connect sustainable tourism that relate to dark tourism and ecotourism epistemology. Since the lives of many ex-combatants are currently dependent on tourism, it is important to understand what elements have been involved in the success or failure of these projects. Thus, by closely looking at their inception and evolution, I expect to have a better perspective on what is happening in the rural areas of Colombia and the peace agreements. In this process, my intention will be to not only unfold the multiple challenges that are happening and could be addresses more effectively, but also, to recognize the opportunities that these communities are facing while they try to adjust to a new reality.

While dark-eco tourism has been used as a strategy by many ex-combatants for reinsertion to society, some initiatives are better established and developed than other ones, depending on location, richness of the ecosystems, support, sponsorship, capacity, etc. One of the problems has been that many of the areas are difficult to be accessed, because these often-remote places lack highways and transportation methods that could impulse the flow of visitors. Besides, because these projects were established under very complex political, economic, social, cultural and ecological dimensions, their existence has been conditioned by many external factors, such

² The JEP is technically part of a body known as the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice Reparation and Non-Repetition. It works under a truth commission, a disappeared person search unit and a verification body.

³ Territorial spaces for capacitation and reincorporation.

as the support from the government, private sectors and NGOs, making their long-term sustainability challenging.

Yet, some projects like the one established in Tierra Grata Cesar, La Paz municipality, have managed to develop an already engrained model of what they call: A model of tourism of peace that is sustainable for the environment, the culture and economy of the area. The tours are mostly developed in the Perija Mountain Range, which has a big diversity of cultures, customs and flora and fauna, making it a perfect spot for tourism development. Unlike others, this project was supported by the International Cooperation of Sweden and the PNUD⁴, being one of the reasons of why this example became a success story. Projects like this one, have proved that with the right strategy and assistance, a mixture of dark-eco tourism has the potential to assemble resilience for the environment and for those that were involved in a period of violence.

In Colombia the tourism industry has brought many positive outcomes, but in some cases, tourism has been sold to the communities as a fairy tale that would fix all their problems, where they sometimes received economical support but no training, guidance or a backup study that would analyze the possible variables in the development of the projects. Thus, it becomes important to evaluate and acknowledge what is the current situation, because despite that the possibilities to stimulate tourism related to the natural richness of Colombia and the conflict are immense, many of the current efforts and initiatives are at a very early stage or just not viable.

2. BACKGROUND

A Period of Adaptation and Relocation

After the final signature of the peace accord in 2016, the Colombian congress approved a number of decrees that defined 26 transitional points and zones (ZVTN⁵) that FARC revolutionaries would occupy until August 17th of 2017 for the process of disarm and reinsertion. For the first eight months, these designated areas were regulated by clearly determined guidelines that maintained the occupants separated from surrounding communities (with very small exceptions). “The process was supervised by the tripartite monitoring and verification mission. Comprising the authorities of the government of Colombia, members of FARC and military international observers from the United Nations. The principal order of procedure was maintaining the ceasefire” (Reincorporation for Peace-ETCR, 2020).

By June 2017, the United Nations had completely disarmed the rebels and by September in the same year the operations of extracting the remaining weapons caches had also drawn to a close. The weapons returned by the FARC rebels would eventually be used by Sculpture artist Doris Salcedo in the work *Fragments*. The Installation was elaborated with 37 tons of molten metal from the armament given by FARC to the UN commission and stands in an alternate room of the National Museum of Colombia in Bogota as a reminder of the conflict.

After the ending of the ZVTN zones on August 15th 2017, these areas would transform into territorial spaces for training and reincorporation ETCR. With the technical change in the legal status, came also essential changes in their purpose. The new designated twenty-four areas main

⁴ United Nations Program for Development (Programa de naciones Unidas para el desarrollo)

⁵ Transitoria Rural Zones of Normalization (Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización) were pieces of land that were originally given to FARC members so they could start their process of transition to legality and civil life.

objective would be to contribute to the process of reincorporation to civil life of ex FARC members. In the ETCR's they would have access to some lands, training to develop projects, a solution for a temporary household, and provision of goods and services that were intended to facilitate the initial phases of adaptation. Besides, the idea was that these designated areas would work as an opportunity to close the gap between the demobilized men and women, the local communities and government agencies (governors and mayors) in a process of integration that should simplify accessibility to employment opportunities.

In the coming years, some of the ETCRs survived a difficult period of transition, especially those advantaged by location, size and adequate organization into productivity and reinsertion of the community. However, the majority of those that signed the accords have started to re-organize independently in approximately 93 new territories that they denominate NAR (new areas of reincorporation). The main reasons why many people started to abandon the ETCR's are that the government eventually closed many, because some properties were rented or sometimes even located in National Parks. Besides, the continual breach of promises, increased skepticism on Duque's administration, and incessant systematic killings became the decisive factors on the relocation that took place.

3. METHODOLOGY

The overall methodology of this paper is qualitative research through ethnography and case study analysis. The process to collect data includes ethnographic fieldwork that uses formal and semi-structured interviews with tour guides, scholars, planners, consultants; and a more informal and conversational approach to interview tourists and community members when necessary. I also used participatory observation to understand the setting and design of the tours (sites), while assessing the behaviors and motivations of tourists and tour guides. The proposed multidisciplinary methodological framework, that focuses on the relationship of ecology and violence in dark-eco tourism use a multi-sided approach that will fundamentally mix three mechanisms as a research strategy:

- Participant observation, field notes and visual data collection (photos and video)
- Oral Interviews that used structured and semi-structured interviews about life history and experience reports
- Bibliographical and documentary research (audiovisual and text analysis)

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Dark Tourism and/or Slumming in Icononzo

On January 2022, I visited one of the last and better organized ETCR's: Icononzo (La Fila) Tolima department. In this area, I also had the opportunity to see first-hand the relocation that is taking place in NAR's, where by settling on the peripheries with productive projects, some ex-combatants have started a process of re-adaptation. Although many of these projects were originally connected to tourism, since recently not many people are visiting and the place is experiencing a period of decline, they have started to work mostly in agriculture. I selected Icononzo because this area of Colombia holds particular significance to the history (origins) of FARC and is well known that their ETCR is one of the biggest. Besides, the place is only 4 hours from the capital Bogota. I also heard that the security situation was more or less stable,

so I did not want to put myself in danger by going to more remote places. Originally, I tried to search for tours as a regular tourist would do on the internet, but it was impossible to reach anyone this way, so I managed to speak to a person that had worked before with the community and he put me in touch with one of the leaders of FARC in the area.

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In our first interaction on the phone, Donald (that is his alias of war) asked me why I wanted to visit them. I said that I was interested in taking an ecological tour with them and that I also wanted to know about the history of FARC, the conflict, their ideology and how are they doing after 5 years of the peace agreements. He said that he could organize it, he asked me for 200 US dollars for a day tour. I offered him 50 US dollars for two people including food, with the possibility that I would spend the night with them if the circumstances allowed me. He agreed.

Donald told me that he would pick me up in Icononzo at 8:30 am outside the church. It was mentioned that we shouldn't bring our car to La Fila because the roads are in very bad condition, so they would organize a parking lot in the little town. When we arrived, we were picked up in a bullet proof Toyota camper and Donald had 2 armed bodyguards (1-woman Alina and 1-man John). I certainly didn't expect any weapons to be involved on the tour or that the situation would be that complicated with regard to security in that area. They all introduced themselves politely by shaking hands and before we got in the car, we had to establish some awkward conversation to build a type of trust, I noticed that they all had hats from Asodipaza a peace association. They told us that after parking the car in a nearby house, we would drive for about 45 minutes to the ETCR to see some of the projects they were developing. In the afternoon, we would do some ecological walks near the river (Sumapaz) where we could also visit areas they had combat with the army and are important to the history of FARC. When we were in the car, they explained to us that we shouldn't be worried about our safety and that they needed to have weapons because unfortunately many FARC leaders are being assassinated all over the country.

The first thing Donald explained to me that deserves to be analyzed, was that they are open for tourism, but they expect to develop tourism of conscience and they don't want to become subjects of exhibition, so we were advised to be respectful if we planned to establish some type of engagement with the community. Apparently, in 2017 when all eyes were on them and the place was full of journalists, politicians and tourists, they decided to give a type of booklet to any kind of visitor before arrival to give them a contextualization and sensibilization, as to prevent the tours from turning into a circus. Their idea was to have a pedagogic experience about the war in Colombia, but because nowadays there are not many tourists, they stopped doing that. I explained that I am an academic and that the reason I wanted to take the tour was mostly because I am interested in projects of peace that relate to tourism but also involve a conflicted past. I think that after they heard that, we finally broke some type of tension that was in the air and we started to develop a connection where we all opened up.

As a dark tourist activity, the tour guide had already some concerns of ethical or moral implications, advising us of a behavior that should be followed. What is true, authentic, or appropriate in a dark tourism site can be shaped around some codes in a culture, but also it is ultimately a personal and subjective affair where personal values play an important role. At this stage, I did not really know what I would find or what exactly he meant, but when we arrived to the ETCR and I started to see mutilated kids, men and women, I immediately understood that

the traces, struggles and traumas of war were everywhere and that some code of conduct was indeed required. This has been referred as “the issue of observing tragedy, remembering tragedy, living tragedy and even consuming tragedy, has always been at the center of the academic debate of dark tourism” (Wight 142).

As a visitor, I felt it was hard to avoid being drawn towards interpretations of realities and also to feel uncomfortable. It is indeed very different to visit a dark tourism site like a grave or a memorial than walking around people that it is experiencing the damage of war every day of their lives. At first, I did hesitate on how much engagement I would have on this experience with the community, but I soon realized that these people were not doing this much for the money, but instead because they wanted us to see their reality.

The question of dark tourist sites and attractions is whether it is ethical to develop, promote and even participate in this kind of activities. Most dark tourism sites are by definition “places where individuals or numbers of people met their death or suffering” (Sharpley, 2009). Many scholars have approached the topic by discussing site management issues. For example, after government entities establish a memorial or preserve a site of suffering and death, they need beforehand to consider how to manage these places under appropriate bases upon an understanding and respect for the victims, so “professionals” are usually in charge of the task to establish these projects (as discussed in the chapter of the memorials on Green Island). However, under this specific case, people developing the tours are not curators, managers or tour guides, they are the victims and perpetrators of violence at the same time. Thus, the grounds of ethicality or morality of the tour are settled under premises of common sense, improvised trust and necessity.

After we arrived to the ETCR, Donald told me that he never had Colombian tourists, all the previous visitors were foreigners and it had been almost 3 years since they received anyone in the area, situation that apparently is related to the security problems and a bad campaign of stigmatization started by Duque’s government and the media. While we talked, we were eating an “authentic guerrilla breakfast” in Donald’s house, we sat in the same table with his partner Dora (also an Alias), 3 sons and 2 daughters (4 of them are all already teenagers, they later told me that their mother was not with them anymore, 1 is a 3-year-old boy and is the only son with the current partner). Dora told me jokingly that because she cooked, everyone was happy, but that they usually changed roles every day and Donald was the worst cook (as a bully joke that made everyone laugh/ icebreaker). I liked the food, the breakfast was huge, the prefabricated house had only 2 rooms and the construction seemed like it could collapse with strong winds. The house is clean, we joked around with the kids, we discussed about the future and what they wanted to study. The bodyguards were not concerned about us anymore and said they would join us later when we left the ETCR.

Researcher Question: Why do you think that foreigners are interested in visiting you and also why Colombians are usually not?

Donald Answer: The foreigners probably just wanted to meet us, the beard merciless terrorists (then he laughed). But they also usually had a translator so we hardly ever established a real connection with this people, and to be honest we often felt marketed or exhibited. Many members of the community didn’t like when I brought tourists, but the good thing is that they had euros or dollars, something we really miss in the region because we are really poor as you can see Diego. But also, many foreigners come with the UN representatives to help and do good things, but they are not tourists, is different. The Colombians don’t come here because actually

this area is not very popular on ecotourism activities, so I think there are other places that are better, some of our comrades are doing well in other regions like for example in Cauca or Cesar, I can put you in touch if you want. I would like more Colombians to come and see our projects, how we are trying and why we are who we are. We are compromised with the peace of Colombia, that's why I accepted to meet you, because I was curious of who you are, Cristian (my contact) told me that you are a journalist so I thought it is important for people like you to see what is happening, I didn't do it for the money.

In relation to morality and ethicality at dark tourism sites, some authors have discussed that “a principle of collective effervescence where an emotional and social binding of individuals can occur by reflecting, recording and interpreting moral concerns in sites of adversity” (Stone, 2009). According to the answer of Donald and my personal reaction to the reality I was being exposed, this “effervescence” can be certainly true at this particular place and situation, where my own experience as a “Colombian” has also been marked directly or indirectly by the same war, had created a type of greater engagement with the tour and the community because of common language and shared life experience, despite our differences.

It could be argued that the gathering from a tourist motivation perspective in a tourist site of the nature like FARC could be also understood as manifestation of fear, comparison, judgment, classism and/or entertainment on what has been described as slum tourism. “Slumming or Slum tourism is a globalized trend and a controversial form of tourism where impoverished areas are visited out of amusement or curiosity. These places have always enticed the popular imagination, considered to be sites of otherness, moral decay, deviant liberty or authenticity” (Koens et al., 2012). Slumming has historically a long tradition of origin in the global north, for example in Victorian London when the upper classes toured the East End or in 1880s New York when the wealthy similarly began to visit the five points. The development dynamics of this kind of tourism have rapidly transformed, township tourism in South Africa or Fabela tourism in Brazil are just two examples of the increasing number of destinations in the Global South.

Nevertheless, the current case discussed adds a complex layer of morality in slumming on a dark tourist site, where not only the traces of war and trauma are present but also the poverty of the people. Poverty/slum tourism and dark tourism have both separately raised concerns about the ethics that surround these phenomena's, including elements of voyeurism and exploitation that are often leveled on dark tourists or slum tourists. These practices have been criticized and morally judged in prominent newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* or *The Guardian*. However, the benefits of these types of tourism remain widely overlooked, as for instance how slum tourism has the potential to stimulate local entrepreneurship, economic development and to support poverty alleviation. Or as to how dark tourism also could create spaces to alleviate trauma, reinforce identities or integrate unfavored sectors of society.

4.2. Conveying Political Ideologies in (La Fila)

The inherent nature of politically conveyed narratives on many dark tourism sites has been widely discussed and documented. According to the “dark tourism spectrum of supply” (Stone, 2005), those sites on the darkest side of the spectrum are usually highly political, because they possess a higher political influence and ideology, with elements of education or history that

tend to carry narratives of conservation and/or commemoration as well as high degrees of violence related events.

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The political dimension of the tour started to be obvious when we were walking the ETCR after breakfast. Symbolic images of FARC historic legacy and influential characters and messages were everywhere we went (see Fig. 1, 2, 3 and 4). We later even realized that the name of the place La Fila relates to the day when FARC was founded in 1964, as it designates to enlist or enroll in Spanish. Donald told us that the FARC-EP Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army is a Marxist-Leninist group. On the tour we were given some biased contextualization that communists were active throughout rural and urban Colombia since the end of World War I, although the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) was formally established in 1930. The PCC started to expand in rural and urban areas as peasant leagues and popular fronts demanding for improved living, working and education conditions for the working class, (which according to Donald are basically the same claims they have today.

Figure 1. School of La Fila named after (Tirofijo) Manuel Marulanda Velez.



Source: Diego Caicedo, 2022.

The Colombian government began a strong retaliation against the communist insurgents in 1964 with 16.000 troops, attempting to gain control again. FARC was formed that year by its leader and founder Manuel Marulanda Velez (alias Tirofijo) after a military attack on the community of Marquetalia that forced Marulanada and other 47 men to escape to the

mountains to reorganize after losing control of the area. These men became the core leaders of FARC in the coming decades, which later grew in size to thousands of fighters. Marulanda (Tirofijo Fig.1 and 2) remained the leader in chief of FARC until his death of a heart attack in 2008.

As we continue the stroll, we often meet people that approach us with sympathy and curiosity. Donald seems to be a respected leader in the community, everyone knows him. They all have a requirement or something to discuss with him. I know that there is another side of the story where things went wrong, but the tour guide avoids discussing any link of FARC with criminality. I am impressed by the saturation of figures, icons, flags, characters, and slogans that carry strong political messages, ideologies and identities. There is a small library with a lot of revolutionary and history books. As a matter of fact, everything here seems to be political. We arrive at a reunion where we find an agitated discussion. Donald tells us to wait, he also suggests that we can join if we want.

Figure 2. On the left of the image Simon Bolivar-Liberator from the Spanish empire and first president of what currently are: Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Bolivia. In the middle the image of Manuel Marulanda Velez (Tirofijo). Meeting of young residents of La Fila and the University of Tolima.



Source: Diego Caicedo, 2022.

Richard Sharpley argues in *Dark Tourism and Political Ideology: Towards a Governance Model* that “there are innumerable memorials, museums, sites of battles or atrocities and other dark tourist places that, around the world, are constructed, maintained, restored, adapted or promoted as public presentations of death, war and tragedy (often for tourist consumption) that inevitably possess a political symbolism” (2009, 146). Although, Sharpley’s discussion centers mostly around sites that were established by governments and nation-states. The ETCR of La Fila similarly uses events, flags, logos, and remarkable figures of their own battled history that possess cultural and identity significance that relate to events they think that deserve to be commemorated and maintained for ideological purposes. For example, while using the image of Marulanda inside the ETCR as an important figure to be remembered seems almost natural for FARC members, he is still considered a criminal figure by Colombian authorities and society. For decades, he was attributed many terrorist attacks that caused the death of civilians, destruction of infrastructure and the environment. So, by putting his image next to that of Simon Bolivar (a national hero) this could cause discomfort and definitely rejection among many people and sectors of Colombia. Some have argued, “If promoting the visiting of atrocity sites legitimize the atrocity or those who committed it and thus encourage more in the same or different ideological cause” (Ashworth and Graham, 2005). Consequently, the political symbolisms that derive from the manner in which those events are represented, interpreted or signified, that is events of war, tragedies and conflicted history, not only have the potential through their representations and commemorations to be used for heroification of personalities and events, used for identity construction or for commercial gain through tourism, but also to deliver political messages.

Researcher Notes:

The meeting that was taking place involved the community leaders, youngsters that would soon apply for higher education, ARN (Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization) officials and members of the public University of Tolima located in Ibague (the biggest nearest town that is at around 3 hours by car from La Fila). The discussion centered around what the community considered an unwillingness (from the university) to help and facilitate the education of their youth. They claimed that professors should be sent to the ETCR and that the education process should take place there, because it would be impossible for their youth to travel everyday 3 hours to Ibague to take classes. Apparently, in the past other capacitation processes from the National University of Colombia and SENA (National Service of Learning) were handled like that, professors would live among the community and they could select who would arrive there. The university tried to explain that it was difficult for them to do that, and they could “probably” organize the scholarships and living expenses of those that would be admitted in the city. The elders especially seemed to oppose this proposal, while the young remained quiet. Later, I discussed with Donald the matter and I told him that in my opinion (as they were in a process of reincorporation to society) it would be probably good for their youth to go to the cities and experience the real civilian life, establish friendships with others and perhaps open their worlds to new opportunities. Donald told me that the seniors disliked this idea because they had security concerns. But mostly, they worried about how FARC youth could be exposed in the cities to drugs, alcohol and an indoctrination of the capitalist system.

After the meeting, I was introduced to a member of the ARN and he agreed on an interview (he said he had only 5 minutes).

Researcher Question: What projects that relate to tourism are being implemented and what is planned for the future?

Answer ARN representative: As you probably already saw, there is not much tourism around here these days, there used to be a hostel, a restaurant, a souvenir shop with hand crafts and an artisan beer factory at La Fila ETCR but they were not sustainable in the long term so the restaurant and the hostel closed. The beer project “La Roja” (the red) was moved to another place but it is still going well. We are currently working with the community to build a FARC museum here and we want to re-invent tourism, we are working on it.

R.Q. How will be the output of this museum, what items are you planning to include and what is the purpose?

ARN.A: We don't have a clear strategy yet, we are in conversations with the community, we would probably include some rifles, uniforms, FARC logos and rhetoric that narrate their stories, the output and how much is invested in the museum is up to them, we are helping them to decide how to use their funds, etc. I am sorry I have to leave my car is waiting.

Donald seemed kind of upset after the meeting and he suggested we continued walking. He emphasized on how these people always go there to promise things but they don't do anything. Then a few weeks after come back and do the same thing (is an empty vicious circle). We discussed the museum but he said he didn't think it would be materialized in the near future as their permanence in the area was still uncertain. Donald tells me that we are running out of time because we have to eat lunch outside the ETCR, so he wants to show me what is left of all the economic projects they started but unfortunately are not going that well because of broken promises and a lack of continuity in government funding.

Figure 3. To die for the people is to live forever. In memory of (el Mono Jojoy) an ex chief commander killed in 2010 by the armed forces of Colombia. Wall on the restaurant.



Source: Diego Caicedo, 2022.

The first project he wants to show me is La Roja (the reed one) a beer project that originated there in La Fila and has been the only one still giving profit. It grew so much that they had to move the factory somewhere else, what we saw is just the original brewery that is now abandoned. We go to the only local bar and we have a cold one there, where they explained us that the beer name and logo have obviously communist connotations. With beer in hand, Donald seems to have cooled down. We have deep discussions about the current government (that they dislike) and about what it really means reinsertion to society. I suggest that they can't control the lives of the youth that will soon be adults and should decide their own destiny. We parody the beer efforts on breaking the market in the capitalist system as a contradiction, he acknowledges that is part of a process that needs to take place but it doesn't mean they should change their ideology. The second project we visited was a souvenir shop that was mostly open when there were tourists in the area. They opened it just for us so we could see what was left. I found confectioned and somehow abandoned FARC pins (see Fig. 4), key rings, shirts, cups, and so on, that use the symbology of the Farc movement. We finally go to check a restaurant that was a cooperative and is closed, we also see where the hostel/hotel used to be.

Figure 4. FARC pins at the souvenir shop.



Source: Diego Caicedo, 2022.

While the symbolism established by FARC at the ETCR might be originally created mostly for identity and cultural reasons that relate for example to keeping an ideological line even in the new generations. When they started to promote the tourist industry, they developed a line of souvenirs and products (like the beer) that still would convey their political ideology. It is of a greater significance related to what some refer as “cultural politics of tourism development” (Light, 2000; Burns, 2005), tourism may be used or exploited for political or ideological purposes, typically to affirm or emphasize cultural identity. Thus, FARC as a community assumes also a role as a marketer of cultural meanings in tourism. It attempts to make a

statement about their identity by promoting selected aspects of their cultural patrimony while avoiding others that might be controversial, such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, etc.

The process of political and ideological marketing was conceived in the ETCR as a way to develop productive projects, what mostly supposed to help the ex-combatants to familiarize with a lifestyle where economic factors are inherent in the functioning of a “real-life” scenario that they are not used to face. This economic “new reality” required them to subordinate their ideology to more practical and pressing needs of income, even when they have a conflicted relation with the capitalist system that they have historically rejected. But, at the same time it is part of an ongoing process of reincorporation to society.

I identified conflicts in the community to construct their post-communist futures that relate to the opportunities presented by tourism to affirm their new position. It remains unclear how this period of transition will evolve. Their political ideology seems to be at the center of every productive development, including tourism. Yet, they seem to be neglecting aspects that are attached to this period of transition.

4.3. Nature, War and NAR's

In its unstable post-conflict mode, Colombia has started to reinvent, re-formulate and contend its natural spaces. These spaces, now open for tourism with a magnificent ecological diversity, are being repossessed imaginatively and experientially. In this paradigm shift period, some questions arise. First, how will the national natural reserves previously occupied by rebels will be impacted by government policies, land restitutions and attempts of control of new criminal groups? Second, what will be the role played by post guerrilla members in reshaping Colombian ecotourist and natural spaces/industries? Third, how sustainable will rural post-conflict ecotourism initiatives prove to be? And, how will the neoliberal conservation strategies and international global tourism forces affect the environment in the post-conflict scenarios? In the past, FARC used to be the law in many remote places such as parts of the Amazon. After laying down their weapons, they inadvertently opened the region for illegal mining, land grabbers and cattle ranchers who have been tearing down the forests at a record pace. “Just in 2020, 140,000 hectares of the Colombian Amazon were destroyed, equivalent to about 20 soccer pitches every hour. That’s more than triple the level in 2015, the year before FARC agreed to abandon their fight” (Bristow, 2021).

Despite the fact that nature typically suffers during warfare, in some cases it may also be a beneficiary of the chaos created by armed turbulence. In Colombia, due to the altered human activity patterns and high levels of insecurity, certain places became in zones of limits due to in-state intervention, economic activities or human settlements. These conflict/buffer zones inadvertently provided conservation opportunities for the region. Although the armed conflict in Colombia has been governed by similar environment-conflict dynamics, where the positive impacts of war might come unexpectedly and circumstantially, they also may originate intentionally. An example of this is FARC, where as an armed group that used to set up social and convience rules when living in the jungles-forests-mountains, they also convened environmental ones as a mechanism to enhance control over a territory. Before the peace accords, FARC imposed punishments on local farming communities and their members if their rules were broken. For example, for unauthorized deforestation, cutting down trees, cattle ranching (that is now booming), the punishments imposed could differ according to the severity. From doing community work to death penalty (as if for instance someone was a spy). However,

not all land control by FARC was “environmentally” oriented as often is tried to be rendered, they also had interests related to economic activities and crime that affected the region negatively. Natural resources have long been seized in Colombia by armed groups for financing and sustaining their fights (including FARC), particularly in the case of crops used for illicit means such as emerald trade and exploitation, illegal gold mining and drug trafficking. My goal in the following section will be to analyze the role of tourism initiatives as a sustainable tool for the environment as well as for the FARC communities that have experienced crises and violence. The focus of this review will be the impacts of their project’s initiatives from a tourist perspective on natural and human vulnerability and resilience.

Researcher Notes

We meet with John and Alina in Donald’s house at around midday. We depart from La fila and drive for about 1 hour. The road is rough and the driver goes fast. Alina is excited and cheerful to hear some guerrilla music where the lyrics say in Spanish “I am ready here for those that want to kill me. I am waiting with my rifle, my ears, my eyes and my cup of aguardiente (a typical Colombian alcoholic beverage).” We are hungry and heading to a NAR where they have established a pisciculture project that breed tilapia (Fig. 5). Donald explains that some ex-combatants and him started the project by renting the land, this is how NAR is working. He said, these are (new areas of reincorporation) where we are basically on our own. We still get the minimum wage subsidy from the government, so some of us put it together with other savings we had to establish projects to make a living. He also mentioned that because many of the comrades wanted to have a more private, calm and secure life, they left the ETCRs.

Figure 5. Pisciculture project, Rafael and his house at the back.



Source: Diego Caicedo, 2022.

At arrival, we are warmly welcomed with a glass of cold guarapo (a fermented drink from sugar cane) by Rafael and Julia, people in charge of the project “piscicola.” He is a very quiet person, with his eyes that tells us war was hard on him. There is a unique energy in him, a mixture of innocence, suffering and wisdom. His wife Julia is very talkative and excited to receive us. She gives us all the technical introduction of how the pisciculture project works. She also shows us around some of her papaya, mango and avocado plantations (that make her very proud), a chicken farm and some cows. Later, she teaches us how to use a fishnet to take out our lunch. While we cook the fish together in an improvised grill, we just remain quiet enjoying the beautiful landscape, Julia mentions that we can spend the night with them if we want. After resting for about half an hour after lunch we have a cup of coffee, preparing some water, fruit and get ready to start an ecological walk that will last until about 6 pm. Rafa will be our tour guide because he knows the area well.

The hot afternoon went smoothly, my first impression was that these guys and girl (Alina) were in their comfort zone in nature. I was too, so we found a common ground of interest where the atmosphere was pleasant and sympathetic. While we walked, they discussed how they missed that type of lifestyle, being in clandestinely without the concerns of the capitalist system, they never had to worry about not having what to eat and they lived in a community with camaraderie where everyone would collaborate and have a role. There were other worries of course (John told me), because war can be hell. But I don’t regret what I lived, I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world, but life is different now, I have a family, we are moving to a different place of peace, I can feel it.

First, we headed to the river to do some fishing and take a bath to freshen up because it was a hot day. After, we started our war-ecological journey with Rafa always in front. Finally, he started to talk and open up like if we had won his trust, he told us that during their times in clandestinely they used to patrol in lines in places just like the one we were, this was where FARC as a movement originated (the Sumapaz river, Tolima) so the area holds a lot of meaning for them. “Patrolling” depending on the area, would have different ways, where for example they could talk or not. In this zone they would have to be aware of snakes and honeycombs, if someone spotted any they would touch the shoulder of the person in front in a chain reaction where the whole troop would be informed. They needed to read the signs of nature to know about the possible dangers in the surroundings, birds or dogs would spot undesired human presence. Donald stopped us and showed how they would probably plan an attack on the army, performing where they would locate the rebels, how they would wait, what weapons, etc. The tour was starting to be very ludic. Not far from the river we spotted some caves made of big rocks, they explained that places like that could not only hide fire for cooking but it would also provide some shelter from rain and wild animals, making it the perfect spot to spend the night.

In the following hours we patrolled “liked they used to” about 25 km of the territory, we visited some graves where they showed their respect to those fallen during the war period, issues of war were discussed in more depth from their perspective and ours. Rafa particularly guided us through the biodiversity of the place, while Donald gave us the war contextualization. We managed to spot otters, a wide variety of birds, snakes, frogs, insects and multiple plants with uses unknown to me. We came back to Rafa's house at about 7 pm where we had a one-hour discussion of why this activity had been important for them and for us, where we all agreed that this was what the peace project should be about. We had a last drink, exchanged Facebook and promised to meet in the future. Julia gave me a papaya, a hug and wished for a safe return.

The drive back to Icononzo was Joyful and full of jokes, no more serious talks about politics, war or class divisions. We did manage to establish a connection during that day, I still talk with Donald occasionally and I have sent him a couple of tourists.

As a tourist activity, recreational fishing maintains a non-consumptive or reduced impact use of fishery resources through catch and release, which is what we did while fishing in the river. “This recreational angling has been identified as a potential vector of ecotourism and conservation” (Butler et al, 2020). While the ecotourist attachment of this project seemed to be incidental and improvised, as seen in the ecological walk we had after lunch with FARC members, the place has the potential to become an ecotourist site for further development because of the remoteness, sustainable farm approach, and biodiversity of the area. The project also has positively proved to be able to generate resources of income for those ex-FARC communities, contributing to their own livelihoods while also promoting sustainability and conservation in their new adapting reality outside the ETCRs.

From a dark tourism theoretical standpoint, this particular tour falls under the scope of Philip Stone's “seven dark suppliers’ framework” in two categories. First, “dark resting places” that according to Stone's definition are sites that essentially trade on the act of remembrance and respect for the deceased. Thus, by visiting the graves of two ex-combatants that perished in combat, we participated in the commemoration of historical figures that hold significance for FARC. Second, “dark conflict zones” are those sites visited by tourists that are associated with warfare. With an educational and commemorative focus, these sites are usually historic centric and are originally non purposeful for the dark tourism context.

Within this binary of dark tourism and ecotourism in the case studied, both disciplines adhere into a tourist experience that incidentally encounters issues of war and ecology. In this context, the main objective of tourist development by the FARC communities has been directly related to their economic subsistence and reincorporation to civilian life, while keeping out of war. However, by pursuing these initiatives they have also found spaces that are important means of motivation to care and maintain their natural and cultural heritage.

From an ecotourist perspective, it has been argued that: “The notion of travel should be restricted to undisturbed natural areas with a mixture of a nature-based experience that involves a learning process and a certain degree of cultural environmental awareness/conservation that empowers the local people upon whose resources the tour depends” (Wearing and Neal, 2009).

Similarly, dark tourism perspectives have high degrees of conservation, awareness and education attached to its ethos. It is no coincidence that often schools and other educational establishments organize visits to battlefields and sites of war. In this context then, the current tour happens to take place in a previous battle field with a privileged biodiversity. Therefore, ecotourism and dark tourism encounter here in a common ground, where natural resources, environmental issues and past human induced violence interconnect in a post conflict scenario. In this case then, the confluence of both disciplines renders the potential to be vehicles for the enhancement of peacebuilding strategies. The tour taken with FARC in Icononzo Tolima, involved elements of violence and death, a reality that they know well and want to leave behind. Yet, the experience also took place in an undisturbed natural area where the enjoyment of the flora, fauna, geology and ecosystems concerned a process of learning and interaction. I must underline here that despite none of them having any academic formation on biology and related natural sciences, their knowledge, respect and comprehension of the environment are incredibly profound. The following section will explore how after the signature of the peace agreements,

the government started to establish a set of expeditions (Colombia BIO) that involved strategically formed teams of: FARC ex-combatants, members of the community affected by violence and scientists from different disciplines.

4.4. The House of Life

In 2018, 11 documentary film series organized by Colciencias⁶ “Colombia Bio” were launched. Each chapter directed by 11 different directors, shows groups of exploration entering territories previously affected by violence, some unknown. The objectives were to document flora and fauna, to encourage the important role of “diverse” communities in the construction of a Colombian post-conflict scenery, and to promote the conservation of biodiversity and peace building. Besides, these expeditions had the intention to start to explore the possible future development of ecotourism projects, where the FARC ex-combatants and the local communities would be familiarized with taxonomy knowledge on the biodiversity of the areas. The films, created and produced by Juan Fernando Lopez, that worked with teams of more than 500 people, allow viewers in a combination of art and science to access territories with great ecological value in Colombia, such as El Peñon, Cayo Serrana, Cerro Tacarcuna, Chiribiteque or Anorí.

The last film of the series Colombia Bio program, titled *La Casa de la Vida/The House of Life* (Lopez, 2018). Records an important part of these scientific expeditions of integration in Anorí Antioquia, a rural municipality that was strongly affected by the conflict. In terms of biodiversity, Anorí falls in the middle of two hotspots: the Andes and the Pacific Choco, this area, like the Colombian side of the Amazon is also an example of a conservation type of biodiversity miracle that was unintended as a consequence of the conflict. FARC presence in Anorí has prevented large-scale development, but also widespread environmental destruction.

It was only until 2017 after the peace agreements that this area largely inaccessible to the outside world finally opened. The aim of this particular expedition, consisting of researchers of EAFIT, Antioquia and CES universities, UN peacekeepers, and 10 demobilized guerrilla and community members that were established in the ETCR (La Plancha) and knew well the area, was to survey one of the richest tropical rainforests on earth by searching for mammals, birds, reptiles, plants and amphibian species. Importantly, the film stands as a testimony to the importance of initiatives in a post-conflict period of integration, where a cultural exchange of knowledge and experience became reciprocal.

From an environmental point of view, the expedition had remarkable achievements reflected in this collaboration. For example, with the help of an ex-combatant Obed Quiroz, the botany team found what was likely to be the first evidence of the Noli palm (*chelyocarpus dianeurus* a new species) that was never documented in this area. The palm can grow about 6 meters tall with huge circular leaves that reach up to 2 meters in diameter, and it was previously only known to grow in a small part of Colombia’s pacific coast. Quiroz, who grew up in the surroundings of the area with his grandparents, said he had always maintained a special relationship with the palm: “Our survival was based on the palms, the brooms we made all came directly from the palm trees and with that, we were able to buy food and clothes. I have moved to gold mining after the conflict but I would like to return to the forest to make a living. When

⁶ Minciencias is a Colombian government agency that supports fundamental and applied research, it is the administrative department of science, technology and innovation.

my grandfather died, my work and relationship with the palms ended. I would like to go back to working with the palms, but this time to protect and conserve them for future generations” (La Casa de la Vida, 49:26).

The same team of botanist scientists, identified also a critically endangered wax palm (*Ceroxylon sasaimae*) in the area, this iconic palm had only been rediscovered in the wild in 2011 and there are believed to be no more than 200 palms left on the planet. Other biology research teams also made significant discoveries of species unknown to science, specifically: Two types of flowering palm, a new orchid species and a tree dwelling mouse. According to the team, these findings of the natural wealth of biodiversity of the area that was unexplored for decades by institutional actors and scientists, would have not been possible without the peace deal and the collaboration of the ex-combatants as guides and auxiliaries of investigation. Although the ecological findings were more than expected, another important factor of the expedition surfaced because of the human components that were taking part in the process.

Importantly, the narrative of the film shows how there is an evolution in the relationship of the researchers and the ex-FARC rebels. While at the beginning there is some type of distrust and dissonance among the groups, later a vibrant relationship of integration develops around nature. Where not only the ex-combatants start to realize symbolically that by sharing with the community their position gains a type of significance, but also that there are different life options that can emerge outside of the war, where they can play a constructive role. On the other hand, the scientists acknowledge that before that experience, it would be really hard for them to perceive how the rebels lived their world from their perspective. “We always hear from them in the media, but having the opportunity to know how they feel, how they think, how they love is a great opportunity to bring us together, what I see is beautiful people that has the desire to learn, they are also only humans trying to find their place in the world and deserve to be heard” (La Casa de la Vida, 32:18).

After the expedition was over, some of the testimonies of those involved in the project would emphasize how this experience was transformative and how it would also send a clear message to the country about compromise on peace building. Ovidio Antonio Mesa alias “Anderson” a FARC ex-combatant and director of the ETCR La Plancha in Anorí, stated that: “We want to preserve nature, which has always been one of our principles, our aim is to generate trust in various processes that are being built. We want Colombian society to be aware of our human side, to understand why we ended up in the guerrillas, that we are also made of flesh and bones, we feel, and that we want to share our experiences with them (the scientists and the community), but we also want to learn from them. It was very enriching for us to get to know the plant and animal species on their categorizations and names. We also have a lot of hope that in the near future more initiatives like this one could be implemented for the development of the community. The most beautiful part of this expedition was to go to a forest where previously only the army and FARC were able to move in combat. However, nowadays what we are doing is exploring knowledge, the forest, the conflict is over and keeping peace is the most important” (Yarce, 2018).

Lina Marcela Bolivar a botanic biologist from CES university said that: “To be here is like a dream that became a reality, it is the country that I wanted to start to see. To leave behind all the stigmas, we need to start to put hate aside as a society and build a new beginning. For me to get into a forest that was basically forbidden for us and discover all these treasures that nature was keeping for us was a very heartwarming experience, but most importantly, doing so by the

hand and eyes of the people that were there for such a long time marginalized by the conflict. This expedition was a symbol of peace and love, where we discovered the real strength in so many forms of life that we have” (Yarce, 2018).

This paper has explored the impacts of violence and political/social instability in a complex post armed conflict scenario in Colombia by analyzing challenges, issues and opportunities in tourism initiatives with FARC ex-combatants. Where it became clear that the capacity of resilience in these presented dark-eco tourist destinations, vary as a result of not only the spatial and functional connections with the natural environment, but also on the cohesion and ability of the communities to overcome the many obstacles that have been presented. Often, socio-economic and political external factors have proved to be vulnerable blind spots that condition the progress of their developments. On this regard, the cases exposed relate to the definition of the chaos and complexity theory in tourism that refers to: “A broad set of loosely related inherent factors of complex nonlinear systems that change and evolve over time due to the interaction of their constituent parts, affecting the tourist products positively or negatively” (MacKerchner, 1999). Thus, under this premise, a destination is then recognized as an unstable active system, which is subject to nonlinear relations, where there are triggering internal and external factors, either human or natural induced that can challenge the structure of an existent destination redirecting it into new dynamic paths.

If we approach these cases as complex systems in tourism, we can then identify subsystems of people (communities) in this case FARC ex-combatants, institutions and organizations (government, NGOs, UN, etc.) and physical elements (attractions, infrastructure, ecosystems) which are interconnected and influence each other. From a complexity perspective, a tourism system or a destination can be dislocated from its steady state condition by a triggering event, “which is random and unpredictable as the outcome” (Russell and Faulkner, 2004). For example, in the case of Icononzo the election of Ivan Duque (a right-wing leader) in 2018, would affect all their developments in tourism and other related initiatives. However, some authors suggest that: “These tourist destinations that encounter complex events that put them in a state of chaos could deal with and be better prepared to reduce the impacts caused by crises through self-organization, learning (innovation) and transformation to a more desirable trajectory, as meant to improve destination resilience” (Davoudi et al. 2013).

The role of dark-eco tourism in post conflict-ridden destinations and their relationship, have been investigated in this paper by providing an increasing understanding of the possible positive role in socio-economic processes among different communities and groups in the Colombian context. Where tourism indeed showed the potential to act as a force of peace, reintegration and reincorporation to civility (depending on the circumstances). However, in some cases this tourism as a “panacea” strategy has also resulted in the waste of resources and time, because these initiatives just don’t have the grounds for the development of tourism. It becomes pivotal then, for the future development and sustainability of the projects, to have a previous analysis (study) of the possible dynamics involved in the process. Thus, by mapping and previously considering the complexities in these post conflict tourism sites, it will be possible to have a clear idea of the critical factors that could influence a destination's resilience, vulnerability and adaptive response to crises.

5. CONCLUSION

This study began with a contextualization on the peace accords signed by FARC and the Colombian government to clarify a convulsed scenario that has suffered many transformations. It was exposed how during the past years; the socio-political environment directly affected the life of the ex-combatants in a variety of post conflict initiatives that relate to dark-eco tourism. While in the ETCR La Fila in Icononzo, there seemed to be a great deal of tourism projects in 2017, the progress and evolution of some of these initiatives proved to be unsustainable in the long term. The tour guides and the community in general blame this “unsuccess” on the previous right-wing government because of broken promises and a lack of compromise with the peace accords. Although this might be true to a great extent, I believe there are also other related aspects that have provoked this stagnation. First, it is difficult to go to this ETCR, the roads are in very bad condition and there are not any public transportation options to get there, so the tourists are dependent on the availability of the tour guides. Second, insecurity in the area and safety concerns are factors that are definitely affecting the flow of visitors. And third, there seems to be a lack of training in this community for the handling of the tourists, the tour seemed more or less improvised (despite the benefits of integration of the activity).

On the other hand, the political nature of dark tourism destinations emerged as a challenging paradox in a period of transition in the ETCR of La Fila, where the ex- FARC rebels are trying to renegotiate their communist ideological roots within a capitalist system that they are conflicted to embrace for a “realistic” reintegration to society. On this matter, I particularly perceived a generation gap that is disconnected. While the new generations seem to be open to change and discuss a different lifestyle that involves a change in the ideological principles, the older generations seem to believe that the hierarchies and structures of the old days are still an important decisive factor in the future of the community.

By comparing the recent developments in dark-eco tourism in different regions (Bio expeditions and La Fila Icononzo), three interconnected aspects have been identified as essential for the development of tourism sustainability in Colombia. First, I can conclude that the development of tourism partnerships should be encouraged for the future progress of these initiatives, since increased collaboration proved to facilitate a major change in the relationship between host communities and tourism development. The efforts to promote dark-eco tourism destinations in more advantaged locations always had a connection with multiple development bodies that followed, trained, consulted and sponsored the local residents and FARC communities, assisting the process. In contrast, the ETCR of La Fila received some economic support in the beginning, but along the way, their relationship with the government, NGOs and the private sector started to deteriorate, affecting their evolution. Second, A privileged location in terms of biodiversity richness, where the community has something to show to the tourist, has proved to help to establish a positive link between war and ecology, where the tourists seem to connect better with the activities. Third, there has to be a “real” interest and full compromise in the FARC community to get involved in tourism. Meaning that they have to develop an instinct for exploration, probably study a different language, history and/or learn a lot of technicalities on ecology.

On a positive outcome, as a (researcher and tourist), I experienced first-hand in La Fila the possibilities of effervescence that are rooted in emotion and affection that convey a type of social significance, where the interaction of different groups may result in a recharging effect. Which in turn, can encourage a process of integration and social binding where moral meanings

emerge after discussing and seeing issues of war in a dark tourist site. Besides, in the proceeding of this experience a number of key issues emerged (that directly relate to dark tourism epistemology). Ethicality surfaced as main concern from the tour guide to keep the experience in a line of respect that would not cause any discomfort in the community. Although, the necessity of a guided morality was provided verbally (before arrival), eventually, it had to be assumed as instinctive, because by being presented with human suffering at La Fila, sentiments of voyeurism and consumption would leave the tourist confused within a shocking effect. It is worth mentioning that while the tourist experience progressed, a common ground developed, where communicative spaces were assembled. Resulting potentially in the provision and extraction of moral meanings that were renegotiated.

These connections and positive outcomes on social binding were also perceived in the Bio Colombia Expedition. Specifically, issues of war also became extended as a source of environmental concern, where nature played a role of reciprocal exchange of knowledge and collaboration. Under this context, dark eco-tourism has started to work as a space where a variety of contrasting communities encounter in a post conflict period in Colombia. Thus, one of the most important challenges is that these recently opened natural spaces, should further develop a type of respect and trust that can only come through the recognition of the wide diversity (cultural, social, racial and natural) that is intrinsic to Colombian society.

It is only by meeting each other then, that we can start to break the social segregation that has marked the conflict to start narrating our diversity differently on projects of peace. This process of reintegration, that holds a lot of traumas of war and inequality, could work a way out of the struggle for many people. For this to happen, all the parties involved in the process must understand “others realities” in order to come to terms with each other’s interpretations and perceptual views of any given situation that may cause discomfort or discrepancies.

The role of diversity and significant cultural divided groups in tourism have been described as to: “Placing external definitions and ways of life (such as tourism) on people and communities that can affect the lives of people involved in far reaching ways. Ecotourism for instance, tends to provoke a positive acknowledgement when working with marginalized sectors of society that might already be dealing with stereotypes and misconceptions placed upon them” (Wearing and Neal, 2009). Although this quotation refers to the possibilities of ecotourism in Australian aboriginal groups, in the context of this paper, FARC ex-rebels have been also dealing constantly with stigmatizations by different sectors in Colombian society. Hence, it can be also recognized the possible role of ecotourism in cultural learnings that influence the perceptions of different groups of people in the Colombian context that can help the reintegration process. Where by establishing a cross cultural or/and social understanding that starts by the interaction in the tourist activity, a positive perception of other groups can surface.

Importantly, this research identified another further advantage from dark-eco tourism activities that goes beyond the “social dimension” and integrates the environment as a part of the equation. Where by addressing ecology and biodiversity as part of the peace process, but also as one of the elements that caused the conflict in the first place. Colombia could ensure that the further developments related to tourism are conflict-sensitive and consider potential risks from the mismanagement of natural resources. In this way, dark-eco tourism has the potential to support economic recovery, the development of sustainable livelihoods, but also crucially, incorporate natural resources and environmental issues into post conflict planning.

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