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# Environment as Discourse: Searching for Sustainable Development in Costa Rica

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**ABSTRACT:** This study analyses the social and political discourses related to environment and sustainable development in Costa Rica. The central interest is on those development institutions and ideologies that promote social interventions in the name of sustainable development, and on those social processes and economic relations on which the discursive formation of environment and sustainability is articulated. Four different kinds of ideologies of environmental sustainability are analysed: Environmentalism for Nature, Environmentalism for Profit, Environmentalism for the People, and Alternative Environmentalism. The study highlights the complexity of political discourses that construct the relationship between nature and society, and the multiplicity of the means by which the control over natural resources, within the internally differentiated development apparatus, is defined.

**KEYWORDS:** sustainable development, environmentalism, Costa Rica, access over resources

## THE ERA OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Within the last two decades, concern about environment and sustainable development in the Third World has become a central feature of development policies and thinking. Instead of the polemics of the 1980s about underdevelopment, in actual discourse, all is sustainable development, the whole theme becoming popular since the Brundtland Commission of 1987, and strengthening since the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development (UNCED), held in 1992 in Brazil. This UN Conference inaugurated environmentalism as the highest state of developmentalism (Sachs 1993: 3).

In general discussion, sustainable development is easily assured of a place in the litany of development truisms, but without a careful conceptual analysis of what is to be sustained, for whom, and by whom (Redclift 1987: 3, 1993). The

discourse on environmental sustainability is not seen as a social construction in modern world politics, where the emergence of a new perception of global relations makes environmental questions no more local but global problems, and where the great concern for environmental sustainability in the Third World derives from the reconstruction of the relations between economies, ecologies and cultures at new levels and under new terms of control and power. Discussion on sustainability adds an environmental dimension to an already contested development discourse, the very term presenting itself as a central point for debate over development and power (Adams 1992, Escobar 1992).

This study aims to illustrate the multiple discourses on environment and sustainability, by examining the social and political discourses related to sustainable development in Costa Rica. In public, Costa Rica is presented as a country which stands out globally as a leader in environmental protection and biodiversity conservation (Calvo 1990, Holl *et al.* 1995: 1549). More than 12% (622,000 ha) of the country's land area has been set aside as national parks, a figure that represents one of the highest proportions in the Americas. During the UNCED, Costa Rica received an international award for its conservation policies, and the country was praised as a model for sustainable development worldwide (Boza 1993).

The study focuses on the diverse meanings of environment and sustainability, and on the competing strategies of resource utilisation and control among the multiple institutions and agents promoting sustainable development in Costa Rica. Its central interest is in those social and political settings in which the various interest groups – conservation activists, biodiversity prospectors, agrarian politicians, development experts, rural extensionists, multinational corporations and local peasants – find their social positions, their specific patterns of legitimating power, and their cultural constructions on environment and sustainable development. The principal research object is, therefore, not just the people to be 'developed', but the 'development apparatus' that is to realise sustainable development; this extending from global development agencies to local-level nongovernmental organisations. As remarked by Watts (1993: 264), while much work has been undertaken on the political economy of the development organisations, relatively few studies have bestowed attention on how these organisations function as systems of knowledge. This in the sense of development experts producing, disseminating and legitimising 'development truths'.

Local people, usually constructed as beneficiaries or victims of development interventions, are seen as self-motivating actors, actively involved in discourse on environment and development. However, a one-sided actor-oriented approach, according to which no matter how degraded people might be, they preserve room to manoeuvre, is not sufficient.<sup>1</sup> By stressing the individual's capacity to create, actor-oriented researchers tend to remove agents from

structures and to replace determinism with voluntarism. At the same time, they forget that the central questions related to environmental degradation and rural deprivation are to be found in land tenure relations, market dependencies, organisation of economies, and violence against local knowledge (Bebbington 1993).

The same problem arises in postmodern cultural analysis. Although postmodernists agree that nature is socially and culturally constructed, they do not note that what kind of nature we want to construct, is also a political question. Cultural relativism, with its celebration of difference, constructs static views of local knowledge and romanticised visions of non-Western relations between society and nature.<sup>2</sup> To disaggregate the hegemonic view of sustainability as an apolitical issue, it is necessary to contextualise the multiple discourses on environment and sustainability in their specific institutional fields. This in order to recognise the struggles over resources and authority within the internally differentiated development apparatus, as well as to note the inescapable dialect of fact and value in the construction of development discourses. There are many 'myths' in development issues, and in order to situate the multiple discourses on environment and sustainability in time and space, one has to reconceptualise. Universal models of world development easily rediscover their own assumptions in ethnographic material, without any notion that the ethnographic theories also are socially constructed, and powerful in making some aspects of social life invisible while overemphasising others (Peet and Watts 1993).

This study is based on anthropological research carried out in Costa Rica during 1990-92. This included fieldwork in a rural community, called Alto Tuis, in eastern Costa Rica, as well as in various Costa Rican ministries, development institutions, and nongovernmental organisations.<sup>3</sup> The Alto Tuis community has a highly skewed land tenure and a complex social structure. The majority of the population are small-scale peasants, combined with landless peons, big cattle raisers, absentee land speculators and a group of Cabécar Indians living high up in the mountains. The region was heavily deforested as a result of land colonisation policies between the 1930s and 1970s. As small-scale cash croppers of coffee and sugar cane, the peasants of Alto Tuis have been linked to global markets and policies for a long time (Nygren 1995a).

The informants' accounts presented in this study were chosen on the criteria that they express those general themes repeated in the discourse of different interest groups on environment and sustainability. The aim of these pieces of narrative is to illustrate that environment and development are socially constructed concepts, loaded with diverse associations and meanings. Simultaneously, they illustrate how the social hierarchy is often reproduced in thought and speech, and how concepts of the proper utilisation of nature change between different social and cultural actors.

## THE 'JARGON PHRASE' OF SUSTAINABILITY

The late 1980s saw a strong greening of development discourse in Costa Rica. Increasing international pressure for environmental sustainability challenged agrarian policies based on extensive cattle raising and coffee and sugar cane monocultures, with heavy use of agrochemicals. The discourse changed from Green Revolution to Green Development, with resistance to deforestation and campaigns on behalf of conservation. This occurred with clear connections to the worldwide concern about the disappearance of tropical forests, about the links of tropical deforestation to global climatic change, to the loss of biodiversity, and to an ecological crisis threatening 'our common world'.

Divisions between different directions in the country's agrarian policy only grew. The eco-development nexus, with its emphasis on ecological aspects of sustainable development, gained ground in the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining (MIRENEM).<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism and structural adjustment became dominant in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cattle Husbandry (MAG). Between these two mainstreams there remained a minority of alternativists highlighting that environmental and human welfare issues are two aspects of the same question, and any policy which ignores the structural issues has little to do with sustainability (Carrière 1991).

In this multiplicity of development policies, the one thing which is widely supported is sustainable development. As mentioned by Rowlands (1993: 385), 'sustainable development is today's Good Thing', and so nobody is against this. According to the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987: 43), sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Somewhat similar, highly abstract statements are continually presented in discussions on sustainability in Costa Rica. In all the development plans, concepts like 'our common world', 'sound resource management', 'fulfilment of basic human needs', 'future generations' and 'local participation' are repeated (e.g. DGF 1990a, DGF 1990b, MIRENEM 1990, WRI/INBio 1993). According to the Plan of Peasant Forestry of the Costa Rican Forest Service (DGF 1990a: 2), sustainable development means 'development where rural populations and their organisations participate actively in forestry that aims at the recuperation of rural environment, together with better fulfilment of life-quality and self-determination of rural communities.'

In theory, this sounds simple. However, any development apparatus is not a monolith. There are multiple state institutions, international aid agencies and nongovernmental organisations, pursuing different goals and responding to different ideologies in their struggle over sustainable development. In a situation where environmental issues are gaining increasing international financial support and high media visibility, all the development experts swear by the Big Thing of Sustainable Environmentalism, although there is no agreement as to

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what this politically loaded concept includes. In the following sections, four ideologies dominant in the current discourse of sustainable environmentalism in the Third World will be analysed, in the context of Costa Rica.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR NATURE

First, there is 'Environmentalism for Nature'. According to this approach, supported by many officials in MIRENEM, and by many activists in the nongovernmental environmental organisations, sustainable development means primary environmental care: protection of the country's natural forests and conservation of its wildlife and biodiversity. In the policy of MIRENEM, the struggle for the maximum conservation of the country's forests has priority, with plans to increase the area under national parks to 17% of the national territory. To achieve this aim, MIRENEM negotiates with international aid agencies and environmental institutions, many of which have their Latin American headquarters in Costa Rica. In recent years, Costa Rica has obtained more foreign aid for conservation than any other country in Central America. As a politically 'beautiful' matter to support, the private donors include companies like the McDonald's Corporation. In 1992, Costa Rica received a 30 million USD loan from the Inter-American Development Bank to improve infrastructure in several national parks, and the government was negotiating the reception of funds for conservation via the debt-for-nature swap mechanism, meaning the conversion of Costa Rican external debt titles into a local currency for investment in conservation programmes (Boza 1993).

Among the advocates of Environmentalism for Nature, the amount of protected areas is rarely questioned. The officials in MIRENEM seem to live separated from the country's social reality, where more than 30% of the population gets its income from agriculture (SEPSA 1991). Humans are seen as external to the ecosystem, and the environmental crisis as resulting from destructive human action towards nature, with little attention to socially unequal utilisation of natural resources. Deforestation is defined as a global problem which threatens the existence of all humanity, and in this context ecological aspects are imperative. On social questions, the whole emphasis is placed on educating the people to make them aware of the necessity for conservation. The matter was conceptualised as follows by one of the leading officials in MIRENEM:

I think that we need to establish more national parks. All that we can reclaim as absolute reserve, as natural park, is good for Costa Rica, for the new generations. I think that each day we will become more responsible in taking care of the forest and of nature. Humid tropical forests are the lungs of the world, our existence on the planet depends on them. To be frank, our peasants are very badly educated. They will eliminate virgin forests, although we Costa Ricans should be an example of a green country in America.<sup>5</sup>

In the Second National Forest Congress held in 1992, the former president of Costa Rica, Rafael Angel Calderón, spoke about the need for a new ecological order, without any comment about the need for a new economic and social order. At the same conference, the Director of Forest Resources Section in MIRENEM, emphasised how 'Costa Rica without forests is unimaginable, antihuman and unnatural'. There was much rhetoric of 'the national pride of our protected areas', without any comment on the social conflicts, originating from the government's unwillingness to recognise the resource utilisation rights of the indigenous people living inside the areas.

When Costa Rican indigenous groups struggle for recognition of their ancestral rights to territory, at present constituted as natural parks, the environmentalists for Nature make them invisible forest-dwellers, without any rights to claim resource rights in protected areas. When the Indians emphasise the right of supernatural spirits to control the utilisation of forests, the conservation politicians underline that the forests are state-owned national patrimony. According to the indigenous people, the ecological crisis results just from the neglect of ancestral principles of reciprocity and exchange in the utilisation of natural resources. They look wonderingly at the conservationists' conception of idle parks, where their interaction with the rivers and mountains, forests and wildlife that they have utilised for ages, is controlled through strict legislation. The conservationists' view of protected areas as an untrammelled Eden rather than a time-honoured indigenous habitat, seems everything but sustainable for the Indians.

Among the Costa Rican peasants, too, strengthened state control over natural resources is seen as threatening their survival. When the peasants argue for their forest clearings on the ground of their livelihood, the environmentalists for Nature claim that the ever diminishing forests, even if located on private farms, are a state-controlled commodity. Some conservationists amplify the vision even more, stressing that the remaining forests are the common heritage of humanity, including future generations. According to them, when the survival of the planet depends on the conservation of tropical forests, it is short-sighted to leave control over the natural resources to local populations.

The strategy to terminate forest destruction is sought in centralised state vigilance, backed by incentives to conservationists and sanctions on forest destroyers. The need for nationwide campaigns on behalf of conservation is stressed, and in this context, the empowerment of the rural people means their education for greater environmental awareness. There is little conceptualisation in regard to who defines the problems of which the rural people should become aware. Little attention is paid to the view that environmental consciousness is a socially constructed process, where the conceptions of real nature and its proper utilisation are historically and culturally contested. No wonder, when the environmentalists for Nature emphasise how there is already growing awareness

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among the peasants about the importance of conservation, the peasants themselves ask why it is exclusively the task of the rural poor to take care of protection. This especially in the context of multinational corporations' extensive forest clearings for non-traditional agriculture in various parts of Costa Rica.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR PROFIT

*Prospective marketisation of tropical nature*

On the other hand, there are those sustaining 'Environmentalism for Profit'. According to this view, supported by many politicians in the DGF and MAG, the protection of large areas of the national territory is unreasonable in the country's economic crisis, with the fourth highest debt per capita in the world, and an economy dependent on the exportation of a few primary commodities. In this situation, the international aid agencies put increasing pressure on the revitalisation of the country's economy through structural adjustment and neoliberalism. This with certain hopes of developing an Economic Miracle, similar to the East Asian 'Tigers', in this 'Switzerland of the Americas' (Clark 1995).

According to environmentalists for Profit, sustainable development is not possible without economic growth, and for this reason ecology has to be economised. Sustainable development means economic revitalisation, where private enterprises and multinational companies are encouraged to invest in ecotourism, forest extractivism and biobusiness, in the name of making the country's biodiversity an economically profitable commodity and loading the country's environmental beauty with international market value.

In 1991, the Costa Rican National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) made a Collaborative Biodiversity Research Agreement with the US-based Merck & Co., the world's largest pharmaceutical firm. According to the agreement, INBio collects and processes plant, insect and soil samples to Merck for evaluation as prospective medicines. In the media, much has been made of the agreement as an excellent opportunity to make Costa Rican biodiversity conservation profitable, and of how it provides for Costa Ricans an economically beneficial alternative to deforestation. In comparison to the situation where foreign pharmaceutical companies utilise the country's natural resources in order to develop drugs, with no profits for Costa Rica, the agreement obviously means an improvement.<sup>6</sup>

However, in analysing the situation more thoroughly, critical questions can be raised. According to the agreement, Merck gets exclusive rights to evaluate the samples supplied by INBio, and if the company discovers any active ingredients, it receives all patent rights to develop a commercial product. Costa Rica gets a sum of \$1 million US from all the samples collected for Merck, and



a royalty of 1–3 % from the drugs developed from samples provided by INBio. However, the royalties cannot be used for any other purpose than the conservation and investigation of Costa Rican biodiversity (Martín Ovares and Sittenfeld Appel 1995). Among biodiversity prospectors, the matter has been presented as if Costa Rican biodiversity and US biotechnology were two naturally reciprocal matters, where the Southern ecosystems serve as an irreplaceable resource for Northern biotechnology. This vision, based on the argument that the tropical forests should be conserved as a reserve for the global biobusiness, takes the commercial logic of biodiversity prospecting wholly for granted.

It is just these biodiversity prospectors, the most eager speakers on behalf of local environmental knowledge, who consider this as a culturally and socially free 'human capital' to be exploited in the service of biobusiness. They also put great emphasis on the gender aspect, knowing well that it is the women who take care of the medicinal plants in Costa Rican rural communities. There is little problematisation about property rights in regard to 'wild biodiversity' and the information about its potential use. According to the Merck/INBio agreement, the 'unimproved genetic material' – wild species and traditional varieties of crops and livestock grown by local people – is an ownerless, open-access resource, while the intellectual property rights regimes establish ownership for those new varieties of plants and animals developed by commercial breeders, and for those chemicals developed by pharmaceutical firms (WRI/INBio 1993: 19).

The ecotourism boom is exceptionally heated in Costa Rica. In 1992, several national and international donor funds were established, with revenue sharing and financial help for those establishing ecobusiness in the country. According to the eco-promoters, the only way to conserve tropical forests outside natural parks, is to make them directly profitable for the people. By repeating the idiom of 'use it or lose it', they argue that putting these 'green-houses' up for sale in global ecotourist markets brings both profits and a general understanding that forests must be conserved to be useful. Officials of the Agrarian Development Institute (IDA) were very enthusiastic about the eco-funds. In their discourse on natural resource utilisation, a certain 'dollars-for-recreation' scheme was invoked:

People are just waking up to ecotourism. They are just beginning to establish committees to make ecotourist packages ... because the tourists are those who come with dollars ... Each day more people come here from developed countries and what they search for is relaxation and the direct contact with the tropical forest. As one agriculturist just said to me, the more dense jungle you have now, the more profit you can receive from it. For the panorama, the exotic view that it offers tourists.<sup>7</sup>

There was no attention to who are the real beneficiaries of such ecotourist packages. Taking into account the necessary infrastructure, it can be questioned

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how many of the peasants can afford to meddle in ecotourism. In 1990, some travel agencies from the Costa Rican capital began to organise canoe tours along the Pacuare River, near Alto Tuis. The benefits to the local population have been minimal: the people of Alto Tuis just wondered about those canoes with tourists, appearing every weekend along the river. At the same time, they wondered why the use of natural products is becoming so fashionable. While physicians only a decade ago condemned their use of wild plants as medicines, now scientists come asking them to be guides to the mountains, in search of natural medicines. This boom in naturalism has strengthened the rules for gathering non-timber products. Traditionally, they had no proprietor but 'belonged to a person who encountered them in the jungle', while now their gathering is changing into a new clandestine economy. Don Rodrigo from Alto Tuis could only laugh at the whole circus:

Business advances all the time. Formerly nobody utilised bamboo, except for making coops for chickens. But now it has much value in the markets ... In Bajo Pacuare there is an Indian who has begun to sell wild plants and roots to a homeopath in Turrialba. He just laughed that the more rich in mould and more bitter the plant is, more money you can get from it. Formerly, we gathered orchids only for the home garden, but now you can do business with them ... The only problem is that it is difficult to find them any more. They grow in big trees in a dense jungle.<sup>8</sup>

*The triumph of commercial forestry*

As to forestry, the agents of Environmentalism for Profit underline timber production through commercial forest plantations. In 1988, the government established two special funds, financed by international aid agencies, for peasant forestry. According to the Plan of Extension of the DGF (1990b: 2), the task of extensionists is to 'change the peasants' cultural attitude toward natural resources, so that they would be ready to abandon their tradition of forest destruction and adopt a new forest culture, where their role would be that of intensive timber producers and cash croppers of trees'. A forest expert in the DGF conceptualised the matter as follows:

Formerly, our peasants simply felled the forest to sow pasture or sugar cane. But now we advise them: 'Plant trees, because it means a future.' All this takes time because many peasants are still not aware of the necessity to reforest. I see it as a cultural problem. The other problem is lack of education. Many peasants believe in natural regeneration, and this does not work in forest plantations. We try to show them that a tree is like any other crop, it requires fertilisation, pruning and management.<sup>9</sup>

Inevitably, most of the Costa Rican peasants have traditionally seen forest as a reserve to be removed for agriculture. This, however, is because forest felling

was for a long time a legal requirement for them as colonists to get ownership of the land, and not due to their cultural hostility toward trees, as supposed by forestry agents (Nygren 1995b: 202-10). Considering the abundance of natural forests, their lack of a tradition of large-scale tree planting seems anything but unreasonable.

In searching for cultural characteristics that inhibit the peasants' adaptation of to a new role of cash croppers of trees, the promoters of Environmentalism for Profit shut their eyes to the existing structural biases. According to Costa Rican forest law, a person receives a tax reduction for each hectare he dedicates to reforestation. However, this incentive has no meaning for peasants who do not pay any land taxes. Instead, it stimulates many big entrepreneurs to deforest tropical forest in order to establish commercial forest plantations of exotic timber species. Such was the case of the Industrial Bosque Puerto Carillo, a foreign-owned parquet company. In the late 1980s, it felled hundreds of hectares of forest for the establishment of 3000 hectares of teak plantations (*Costa Rica Today*, 8 August 1992).

In 1992, there was a dispute about La Hacienda de Los Mangos. In this case, 52 national and multinational enterprises had utilised governmental credit to reforestate 1000 hectares of land with fast-growing timber trees. The whole project failed, and in 1992, the DGF demanded that the participators must repay their tax reductions for not fulfilling their responsibilities. The participants themselves argued that the failure was caused by biological misfortune. They appealed heavily in the media that if the DGF did not renounce its demand, the private sector would no longer participate in forestry, and a worldwide image of Costa Rica as a country with exemplary environmental policy would be brought into discredit (*La República*, 13 July 1992).

In the discourse of the advocates of Environmentalism for Profit, the peasants are frequently constructed as 'unruly clients' to be educated to become efficient producers. Their arguments for interventionist forestry programmes are based on the paternalistic anxiety that without control the peasants will spend all the money received from the trees on luxuries or in arranging feasts, instead of reinvesting it in their farming. Their assurances about the significance of trees as poor people's source of cash in the case of contingency seem anything but plausible. No attention is paid to the institutional context, where authorisation from the DGF is required even for the cutting of a tree on one's own farm. A particular authorisation is required to use a chain saw, and to transport the trees to a sawmill. Although presented as an anti-state doctrine, the neoliberalist Environmentalism for Profit seems to justify strengthening state power – for controlling the effects of liberalisation among the rural poor, and for eliminating the most radical ideas of resistance.

*The revitalisation of agribusiness*

In the agricultural sphere, the environmentalists for Profit promote nontraditional agriculture as an optimal way to open the country's introverted economy to modern outward-looking development. The aim is to 'produce more per man-hour, more per cultivated hectare, and more per invested *colon*'.<sup>10</sup> The promoters of nontraditional agriculture in MAG, with support from the World Bank, assume direct causality between export expansion and sustainable development. Their capitalist narrative on the possibilities of nontraditional agriculture to create economic growth pays little attention to the social distribution of the supposed growth. Doubts concerning the marginalisation of peasants are squared with the comment that 'what is not productive, can disappear'. There is a strong belief that the peasants' structural sufferings will be temporary until the economic benefits diffuse to all sectors.

According to the agents of Environmentalism for Profit, there is an increasing demand for nontraditional products in the world markets. However, many of them seem to be as vulnerable to rapid fluctuations of supply and demand as traditional exports. In the late 1980s, MAG campaigned for the production of manioc (*Manihot esculenta*) and taro (*Colocacia esculenta*) as new exports for the United States. There was special credit for this sector and the price paid to producers more than doubled from 1989 to 1990. The following year the price began to decline. This was due to overproduction, as well as to a fairly limited demand in the USA, where manioc and taro proved to be ethnic food, with considerable demand only among the Hispanic population (SEPSA 1991: 74-75). Since the late 1980s, the USA has put quotas on Costa Rican fruit and flower exports, and this policy has only strengthened since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), where Mexico has gained priority in the exportation of fresh fruit and flowers to the USA and Canada (Clark 1995).

Many nontraditional agro-exports require high capital investments. This is especially true in the production of flowers, fruit and green vegetables which require modern techniques in hygiene and pest control, as well as effective systems of processing and storing. No wonder the leading producers are multinational companies, such as Dole and Del Monte. On the basis of their long experience in the production of bananas in Costa Rica, they already have wide-ranging marketing networks, including packing plants, shipping fleets, and air freight services (Barham *et al.* 1992: 68-69). In this context, it can be questioned if the major surplus generated in nontraditional agriculture will be removed outside the country. Due to Costa Rica's geo-political importance to the USA in the 1980s, the country was the principal object of the nontraditional production programmes promoted by USAID and the World Bank (Clark 1995). However, today many multinational companies plan to remove their production from Costa Rica to those Central American countries where the wages for labourers are lower and requirements for social security are looser.

In the international arena, many Costa Rican nontraditional agro-exports are marketed under the rubric 'alternative Third World products', creating ecologically and socially sound production conditions in the country. This especially concerns the trade in herbs, spices, natural medicines and cosmetics to special European and North American markets. In reality, the commercialisation of these products is often controlled by multinational companies. In Costa Rican herbal tea production, the leading firm markets its products under the indigenous name of *Kabata*, signifying forest in the Bribri Indian language, in order to create a soft-sounding image.

Nontraditional agriculture is also marketed as an effective way to mobilise the country's under-utilised labour. However, in many cases, it seems to deepen the existing division of labour, where developing countries engage in the low-paid phases of production, while multinational companies control the phases of processing and marketing. The peasants producing nontraditional exports remain inevitably in the position of highly dependent contract workers. Such seems to be the case with the peasants of Orotina, who produce melons for the Pacific Melon Company. Although the peasants grow melons on their own plots, the company directly controls their production by paying for it with fixed monthly wages. The contract is made for 17 years, during which time the people cannot orient themselves to other activities, nor sell their plot. (Rivera and Román 1989.) In this situation, the neoliberal argument that nontraditional agriculture creates modern land and labour arrangements, radically distinct from the oligarchy clinging to semifeudal land and labour arrangements, seems anything but plausible (Barham et al. 1992).

Little attention is paid to the social sustainability of this kind of profit-based environmentalism. The key to sustainability is seen in the utilisation of modern technology, the right economic incentives and efficient education, in order to make the traditional peasants ready to adopt new forms of production, as well as to induce in them the new mentality of progressive entrepreneurs. There are programmes of nontraditional agriculture coordinated by MAG and IDA, where the actual term peasant (*campesino*) has been replaced by agriculturist (*agricultor*) or small producer (*pequeño productor*), to create the image of the desired change.

Local environmental actions are supported only if they occur through institutionally controlled channels. Any action which questions the sustainability of this kind of money-making environmentalism is labelled as a threat to the country's 'democracy'. The ecological costs of nontraditional agriculture are squared with the comment that economic revitalisation will create better possibilities for utilising environmentally sound technologies. At the same time, there is little recognition that the strategies based on nontraditional agriculture are likely to produce considerable outcomes of social unsustainability, if no attention is paid to the underlying structures of resource access and power at local, national, and global levels.

## ALTERNATIVE ENVIRONMENTALISM

The number of nongovernmental environmental organisations is growing rapidly in Costa Rica. Many of them support an ideology of 'Alternative Environmentalism'. According to this approach, modern environmental problems originate from the Western division between nature and culture that allows environmentally aggressive human action. In their environmental pamphlets, sustainable development is treated under the categorisation of Western *versus* non-Western development, both constructed as internally homogenous and historically static. Indigenous environmentalism means harmonic localisation, while western environmentalism means destructive globalisation. There are strategic arguments based on an inevitable confrontation between the Northern and the Southern knowledge systems, and the belief that the process of environmental destruction could simply be obliterated by Third World people resisting Western ideological colonisation.

In the discourse of radical alternativists, all forestry is defined as destructive deforestation and as a mark of modern humans' environmental predation. The tropical forests are appraised as a 'cradle of harmony' and a 'necessity for improving the human spirit', without any notion that the value of forests is not just aesthetic or recreational for those people gaining their livelihood directly from the forests; it also has social and economic dimensions related to local duties of social survival. There is condemnation of the overall destruction of tropical forests, without careful analysis of real cases. It is just these radical populists who often gain the most media visibility through their criticism of modern people's instrumentalist environmental destruction.

Similar arguments can be found in their discourse on agriculture. According to alternative environmentalists, traditional agriculture is desirable and sustainable, while nontraditional agriculture is a mark of overall globalisation where peasants have no chance of survival. There is a deterministic tone of global imperialism, where export agriculture *per se* is seen as destructive for peasants. Insufficient attention is paid to the fact that the negative impacts of export agriculture on peasant economy are not given, but depend on multiple factors, such as structure of resource access, state policies and institutional arrangements, as well as the requirements of each product in land, capital and labour.

In the discourse of radical alternativists, the peasants are easily described as 'people without history', who have only recently encountered changes in their production systems, imposed by the 'outside modern world'. There is little attention to the transformation of the peasants' land use practices throughout history, or to local people's response to changing national and international development policies. The whole history of the Costa Rican peasants as pioneer colonists, whose task it was to clear the unoccupied jungles for the agricultural progress of the country (Nygren 1995a), is forgotten; and the traditional peasants are defined as self-sufficient forest-dwellers, who lived in harmony with nature,

respecting the value of conservation in all aspects of their lives. Environmental ethics, based on a romantic notion about modern people's need to return to living in harmony with nature, is invoked in their discourse on sustainability, as can be seen in the following vision of a rural extensionist in MIRENEM:

Traditionally, the forest had multiple use for our peasants. To gather fruit and herbs, to search for fuelwood, to go to hunt, to search the peace of nature. But not to destroy. Our fathers were well aware of the value of natural resources ... For them, the forest was a symbol of life, and to cut a tree meant destroying this life. From the forest they received all the medicines to cure illnesses, it was a big pharmacy for them. Now, all this tradition is disappearing as the peasants imitate the life style of modern man.<sup>11</sup>

The key to sustainability is sought in localisation of development, which often means construction of rural people as a monolithic subject. Through strict separation between traditional and modern resource management practices, many radical alternativists offer generalised diagnosis of the country's environmental situation and populist remedies for its recuperation. A strategy to challenge increasing globalisation is sought in the struggle of local people against the World Bank, IMF and other 'development mammoths', without any attention to the existing local, regional and national power stratification, interventionist control, and social violence against local knowledge. The political complexity of the process is easily lost in the paradigmatic categorisation of powerful West and powerless rest.

#### ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR THE PEOPLE

In all this confusion, a small group of alternativists is easily disregarded: those supporting the ideology of 'Environmentalism for the People'. According to them, environmental protectionism is not an adequate mechanism for promoting environmental care. At the same time, they question the social sustainability of Environmentalism for Profit. Most rural people have little opportunity to invest in nontraditional agriculture or large-scale forestry, and so the features of sustainable development have to be sought more in social forestry and small-scale agriculture.

The highest expectations are held for agroforestry, seen as a promising solution to the crisis of peasant agriculture. The idea is to integrate the cultivation of woody perennials, usually trees, in the fields of crops and pastures. As such, agroforestry systems are marketed as nutrient conserving, soil protecting and erosion controlling systems. When using multipurpose species, the trees can also provide fuelwood, stakes, fodder, and alimentary and medicinal products for a peasant household (Reiche 1994). According to environmentalists for the People, agroforestry can make the expansion of forestry into peasant agriculture a complementary rather than a substitutive process. By combining trees with



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agricultural crops, they are not in the same kind of competition with crops for land as in large-scale forestry. In keeping with peasant traditions, according to which cultivated fruit trees belong to the person who planted them, environmentalists for the People aim to create a scenario in which peasants would regard the trees as 'cultural' crops under human management.

The earlier view that inappropriate land use practices originate from the peasants' cultural backwardness is countered by an opposing claim: that unsustainable production systems are the result of cultural degeneration caused by too much modernity. There is a search for action-oriented extension methods, with emphasis on the mutual interaction between developers and local beneficiaries. According to the environmentalists for the People, sustainable development would succeed if the developers only understood the peasants' different kind of rationality and utilised their cultural symbolism in the promotion of development. There are hundreds of books and pamphlets on participatory development, in which local environmental knowledge is mediated as a 'vital essence' to realise sound, human-based environmentalism. A forest advisor in the DGF expressed the matter as follows:

Traditionally our extension was based on the idea that a forestry agent is an expert who enables the peasants' tree planting through technological packages. But at present we are utilising a more human and more cultural-oriented method. This method of local participation means taking into account the local context and the local culture. It also means the introduction of new concepts of development, where the peasants participate actively in the process. This method is much slower but it is more efficient, because the peasants understand all the phases of the project.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the earlier green revolution extension, where peasants were asked to replace their cultural beliefs with 'scientific facts', the agents of Environmentalism for the People emphasise that they have great interest in peasant knowledge systems, such as sowing crops according to the phases of the moon and evaluating soil fertility according to the colour of the soil. The key to sustainable rural development is sought in empathetic understanding of the peasant world-view. This new interest in respecting local culture was explained as follows by an agroforestry extensionist in a programme coordinated by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ):

Waxing and waning moon? Of course it has significance in our extension. We took it into account even in our official project document, in practices related to pruning ... There is no research about the effects of moon, but it seems to give good results. And in any case, the peasants do their pruning in the waning moon, so why not respect it? For rural people it is important that we respect their beliefs, and so if we want to succeed in our project, we have to take it into account.<sup>13</sup>

In practice, the struggle for Environmentalism for the People has often led to idealist 'small is beautiful' thinking, where the peasants have little involvement



in wider decision-making. Participation means apolitical grassroots-level action, with insufficient attention to the broader linkages between environmental degradation, rural poverty and unequal distribution of resources. Although marketed as a local-based development strategy, the ideology of Environmentalism for the People has clear connections to the boom of 'investing in people' and 'adjustment with a human face' in the current World Bank rhetoric of sustainable development in the Third World (World Bank 1989: 36).

In forestry, environmentalists for the People promote small-scale tree planting, with active participation by women. This has often led to 'eco-feminisation', where women are understood as having an inherently intimate connection with nature, and to shutting one's eyes to the gendered division of labour in the rural communities and in society at large. There is no realisation that often the areas which the peasants first dedicate to tree growing are the plots under food crops. Planting timber trees on these takes land from already marginalised food production, and shifts control over the land from women to men. Often the division where the men control the timber trees while the women take care of their protection is even strengthened in the extension: the developers laying stress on commercial forestry in their communication with males, while in the women's group extension, conservation of nature is highlighted. Current discourse on female power has led some extensionists to think that all the gender-related problems can be solved simply by involving the whole family in tree planting. According to them, the question of gender is no longer acute because there is always some room to manoeuvre for the women. The central idea in such projects is to integrate women in development, without any awareness that for many women, development means the possibility of seeking their own identities and of getting rid of paternalist projects, in which rural people are put under the guardianship of developers.

The people of Alto Tuis could not but resent the developers' view of local environmental knowledge as something to be indiscriminately harnessed in favour of developmentalism, without careful consideration of the cultural significance and social memory included in it. In their own traditions concerning intercropping, a complex scheme of local knowledge is taken into account.<sup>14</sup> According to their cultural scheme of hot *versus* cold, applied to plants, soils and nutrients, it is not suitable to plant a hot crop near a cold one, because of their opposite intrinsic temperatures. They never intercrop maize and manioc because the maize as a hot crop overheats the manioc, perceived as cold. Equally, a tree of pejibaye (*Bactris gasipaes*) classified as hot, growing near an orange tree, prevents the development of the orange as a fresh tree. In this respect, the people could only feel that the environmentalists for the People are making them ridiculous. It was not long ago that the developers criticised them for planting porós (*Erythrina* spp.) as shade trees for coffee, because according to them, the

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porós had no value but only took room from coffee. Today, the same system is praised as one of the ecologically soundest agroforestry systems, where the porós as nitrogen fixing trees reduce the need to use agrochemicals.

As a whole, the boom of Environmentalism for the People has often led to romanticised visions of self-sufficient peasants, using environmentally sound natural fertilisation and practising subsistence production in homestead agriculture. In this discourse, agroforestry is marketed as a buffer against the external forces penetrating peasant agriculture. Evaluation of its advantages and disadvantages is made at the level of individual households, based on the perception that peasant units are undifferentiated family-labour farms. The peasants' marginal production conditions are seen as given, without any links to the wider relations of production and power, and peasant identity as ascribed, without any notion of its dynamic construction in diverse social and cultural spheres.

The question why the peasants must continuously intensify their land use on terrain with limited suitability for intensive agriculture is rarely posed. While the 'colonisation of the jungle' was constructed as a substitute for agrarian reform in the early times, now political discourse on land reform is directed toward the intensification of the peasant production through agroforestry. Many agroforestry practices are reasonable only in small-scale agriculture. The manual harvesting of timber trees combined with crops is profitable only when using domestic labour, while the random distribution of plants in mixed gardens is possible only when the technology does not demand uncluttered rows. No wonder agricultural entrepreneurs show little interest in agroforestry; they claim that it is too costly to introduce into mechanised farming. In this context, one wonders if the uncritical promotion of agroforestry will only produce the distinction between food cropping peasants *versus* export-oriented agricultural entrepreneurs in the country's agrarian structure.

By stressing local-sensitive development, environmentalists for the People easily identify themselves as 'benefactors speaking on behalf of the voiceless'. There are demands that attention should be on particular people, at a particular time, and in a particular community, with little debate as to how such a local-based sustainability is guaranteed within a context where the questions of sustainability are no more local, but also national and global. The empowerment of local people in the sense of giving them room for active management of their environment is hardly possible without struggle against institutional regulations and hegemonic authority. Likewise, it is difficult to make any transformation in the stratified social order if there are no changes in land tenure and the knowledge-power regime. However, there are no easy answers as to how to realise such 'redistributive' actions. In a situation where most of the politicians have little will for any social reform, the few environmentalists for the People can do little. In the worst case, their soft-sounding programmes, with aims to increase the degree of self-sufficiency among the peasants, may serve as an alternative to agrarian reform for the policymakers.

## CONCLUSION

As the study on Costa Rica showed, no development apparatus is a monolith, but there exist many contradictory tendencies and rivalries in global, national and local development strategies. All this requires a careful analysis of the social construction of nature, where the discourse on environment and sustainability is linked to the broader systems of development and power.

The current greening of development discourse in the name of Environmentalism for Nature has in many cases hidden rather than elucidated knowledge on local environmental questions (Table 1). Defence of the environment has been separated from social rights, and environmental questions have become an excuse for political intervention in rural communities. The establishment of protected areas is done with insensitivity to the needs of local populations – chasing away the local resource-users and transforming the rainforest into a giant green museum for the benefit of posterity. However, as remarked by Carrière (1994), this Green Museum approach simply does not work. No environmental policies put forward by the state and agreed upon by the international community, such as UNCED, will make any difference if they do not simultaneously deal with the issue of poverty and inequalities.

Environmentalism for Profit is a powerful discourse among the current ideologies of environmental sustainability in the Third World. In this discourse, the establishment of ecotourism businesses and agreements for biodiversity trade are marketed as free of controversy, simply because they are green. The programmes for non-traditional agriculture are considered sustainable, simply

	<b>Imperatives</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Strategies</b>
<b>Environmentalism for Nature</b>	ecological	environmental care	interventionist authority
<b>Environmentalism for Profit</b>	economic	capitalisation of nature	neoliberal globalisation
<b>Alternative Environmentalism</b>	spiritual	liberation from westernisation	radical populism
<b>Environmentalism for the People</b>	humanist	local-sensitive development	idealist grassroots participation

**TABLE 1.** Dominant ideologies of environment and sustainability in the Third World

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because in the era of neoliberalism, nature has to be economised. These advocates of Environmentalism for Profit do business using modern discourse on tropical conservation, biodiversity prospecting, and local knowledge, with little concern for the social problems intrinsic to profit-making Environmentalism.

Humanist integration of people in local projects of environmental care is not enough either, because it does not ensure their positions in the wider knowledge-power regime, and because the ethic separated from politics is highly voluntaristic. This means a critical look at the one-sided Environmentalism for the People ideology suggests that sustainable environmentalism should simply build on indigenous knowledge. Their agendas for self-sustaining and local-sensitive environmentalism involve static visions of local culture. Through ahistorical discourse, incapable of coming to terms with global relations of power, they construct monolithic views of the struggle over environment and development. There is an assumption of static opposition between 'virtuous peasants' and 'vicious states'.

The same can be said of radical Alternative Environmentalism. Many alternative environmentalists consider local communities as almost free to reinvent global political and economic relationships, without any notion that there are limiting conditions to cultural specificity, in that societies all over the world are exposed to a certain degree of globalisation. The tendency to make cultural difference a paradigm through which Western environmental knowledge is constructed as absolute and instrumentalist, while local knowledge is relativist and situational, is based on nihilistic celebration of the Other. Little interest is shown in the dynamic interaction between traditional and modern resource management practices, or in the inevitable articulation of local and global.

Concerning this, there is a growing need for radical social and political change within which a new perception of social concern, cultural representation, and local action would be possible. This is not the rhetorical argument of giving 'voice to the voiceless', where the rural poor are seen as if they did not marshal any social power, nor articulate their concerns. As remarked by Touraine (1995: 92), the centres of modernity have accumulated disposable resources on such a scale that there are no more 'pre-modern places' and no more 'noble savages'. At best, the struggle towards a more sustainable development means a new plurality of social actors and social movements, which redress the one-sided views of environment and development toward strategies that express more diversely ecological, social and cultural reality. Such deconstruction is a basis for changing the terms of the debate, which has so far been conducted in the terms of universalism *versus* relativism. Neither globalism nor localism provides adequate answers, but the middle way between universalism and relativism is pluralism, where both tendencies are seen as meaningful and complementary (Nederveen Pieterse 1991: 21-23).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For the action-oriented approach, see Long and Long (1992), Verschoor (1994).

<sup>2</sup> See van Beek (1993), Bordessa (1993), Peluso and Poffenberger (1989). For the criticism of postmodern analysis, see Gandy (1996), Nederveen Pieterse (1991), O'Hanlon and Washbrook (1992), Polier and Roseberry (1989).

<sup>3</sup> The primary information for the study is based on my field material, which as a whole consists of 150 hours of tape-recorded interviews, dozens of meetings and daily conversations, together with dozens of law texts, ministerial documents, working plans of development programmes, newspaper articles, mimeographs, pamphlets etc. This material was gathered in order to look at the discourse on sustainability from the perspective of diverse actors.

<sup>4</sup> This is nowadays called the Ministry of Energy and Environment (MINAE).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a forest official of MIRENEM, San José, July 1992.

<sup>6</sup> The USA was one of the few nations that did not sign the Biodiversity Convention at the UNCED. This was because of the fear that the convention could force the US drug firms to transfer patent rights for a new drug to a developing country, and thus diminish their comparative advantage in biotechnology. According to the World Resources Institute, Costa Rica has lost 4 billion USD during the past twenty years from unrealised returns on natural resources. On the Merck/INBio agreement, see Blum (1993), Roberts (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the sub-director of IDA, Turrialba, July 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with a local peasant, don Rodrigo Sánchez (pseudonym), Alto Tuis, May 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a forest expert of DGF, San José, June 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Statement by Eduardo Lizano, the former President of the Central Bank of Costa Rica, cited in Rivera and Román (1989: 146).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a rural extensionist of MIRENEM, November 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a forest advisor of the DGF, San José, June 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with an agroforestry extensionist of MIRENEM, San José, November 1992.

<sup>14</sup> In this knowledge system, common in different versions throughout Latin America, hot and cold are not transitory states of thermal quantities, but intrinsic qualities of each object (Nygren 1995b: 64, 80).

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