Chapter 7

"Changing Nature": The Consumption of Space and the Construction of Nature on the "Mayan Riviera"

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1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability is increasingly used in a variety of different ways, and for a variety of different purposes. This chapter examines this apparent adaptability, and some of the ambivalence to which it gives rise in the context of recent eco-tourist development on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Tourism — including its "environmental" variants — is an important aspect of consumption, and points to some key questions for sustainability. Tourism involves both the "consumption of space" and, by representing nature as a consumption good, the "consumption of place".

The discussion of the environmental impact of tourism, and the search for more "sustainable" forms of tourism, really began with publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987; Croall 1995), but the term *eco-tourism* did not gain currency until some years later. The World Wide Fund for Nature has defined eco-tourism as "tourism to protected natural areas, as a means of economic gain through natural resource preservation. A merger of recreation and responsibility" (Kallen 1990:37). In the course of time, however, the epithet "eco" has been applied, with something approaching abandon, to almost any form of tourist development which claims "ecological" objectives (Mowforth 1993; France 1997; Wahab and Pigram 1997).

I suggest in this chapter that terms such as "eco-tourism", and "sustainable tourism", are more than merely cases of semantic diplomacy, designed to present a favourable image of tourist development. Rather, these terms have come to constitute significantly different discourses for public policy, enabling diverse political interests to advance their commercial, or environmental, objectives (Darier 1999). What may have begun as a packaging of tourist operations, has developed into a major recreational activity, with many variants, and distinctive forms of self-justification.

In manifold ways these discourses reflect both lifestyles and livelihoods: the sets of consumer preferences and labels to which different groups — hosts and tourists — become attached, and the economic constraints and opportunities that eco-tourism introduces for the labour force and entrepreneurs in the area. Perhaps of even more significance, however, are the environmental implications of these discourses for the protection of particular places, for example the natural marine environment of Yucatan, and for management of the waste

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and pollution that accompanies tourist development. In some respects "eco-tourism" represents, then, a phenomenon with implications for consumption at both the level of tourist "inputs", including the way in which tourist destinations are represented, and that of "outputs" in the form of pollution, environmental depletion and the consequent 'revaluation' of nature.

2. The Concept of Nature

Environmental struggles, and tourist development, both make much use of "Nature", as a symbolic and cultural category. Usually resort is made to "nature" (particularly in upper case) in contemporary discourse, when a distinction is being made with human society and culture. Thus, as the German philosopher Mittelstrasse has put it, Nature is "the great other", that which lies beyond and apart from the work of Man (Mittelstrasse 1999). In practice, of course, nature is always adulterated or transformed by human hands; it is seldom, if ever, *natural*. We view nature, then, in translation, as it were, without acknowledging that we are the translator — a process of dissembling that works partly because a variety of different human cultures have had a hand in altering, and interpreting, the text.

Our view of "nature", however, is historically contingent. Up until the late-seventeenth century Nature was seen as a wise being with intelligence, created by God, so that humans should gradually come to understand and unlock her powers. Man was the observer of a Nature created by God. Even in the writing of Galileo we find the remark that "she [nature] ... teaches us every one of her works: our task is to understand and interpret." This early "Enlightenment view" of nature persisted, in various forms, until the scientific revolution of the nineteenth century. Such approaches are very different from the late twentieth-century perspectives reviewed below, in which nature becomes a work of *our* imagination, even "a leisure-time scenario filled with the colourful dreams of the tourist industry", as Mittelstrasse (1999) observes. At the same time, I suggest that the different interpretations of nature since Aristotle are still used, albeit unconsciously, in defence of distinct cultural and political interests, and bear heavily on the language and discourses of eco-tourism.

The concept of nature changed during the Enlightenment with the rise of science and scientific thinking. Drawing on the much earlier writing of Aristotle, nature was increasingly seen as "poetics", as produced by the hand of Man. Thus Nature came to take on a paradigm function, for work itself, rather than for passivity and abandon. Nature became a paradigm of 'poetic Nature', with a building, productive essence that could serve as a model for the industry of humans and a warning against inactivity.

However, even in Aristotle we can detect the distinction between cre*ative* nature and crea*ted* nature, which resonates today in the battles around conservation and the ecological movement. Gradually, the understanding of nature became part of the wider hermeneutic tradition — the view that we can *only* understand that which we have produced. This emphasis on our transformative powers (rather than those of Nature) has served to reinforce a dualism between "nature" and "culture", and one that has deepened during most of the twentieth century.

For most of the twentieth century the concept of Nature, as part of the Western philosophical tradition, has been subservient to the guiding epistemological conventions of

modern science. If a philosophy of nature had any purpose it was as the handmaiden of scientists whose confidence, and social prestige, earned through the examination of nature in the laboratory, enabled them to produce accurate pictures of the world. These pictures though are partial and only accessible to those versed in specialist scientific method. Nature was no longer simply observed for its infinite wonder. Rather it was to be deconstructed and dissected, divided into fragments and atoms.

Instead of the great eighteenth-century model of Nature as "order", science seemed to depict nature as "disorder". This view might have originated with Newton, for whom matter withstood the effects of forces or principles. In other words, Nature was a "non-material other" most clearly represented in the work of the greatest discoveries of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science. For Darwin, for example, the organic realm of nature became part of cultural nature — a "natural" selection undertaken by humans. In Einstein's hands, the Newtonian version of the non-material ether that acted upon us, was transformed into the idea of relative space in which gravitational forces were bound up with matter itself.

By the end of the twentieth century the stance adopted by most of the natural sciences towards nature was one of modernist "agnosticism". Discovery lay less in the realisation of the whole than in professional application to the parts. Nature was no longer the "Great Other" that we might hope to approximate, but instead the building blocks in each of us and of which we were composed. Nature was less "a world to live in", as conceived by Aristotle, and more an abstract world in which, as Einstein depicted it, "we" are indistinguishable from other forms of matter. This, in turn, has left as a legacy the central problem that confronts a realist analysis today. Is there any way of understanding nature that is not bound up with scientific understanding that does not take as its starting point, the human experience of nature *through science*, and through the categories of the natural scientist?

The moral dilemmas of a "produced" nature have informed current debate to a considerable degree. On the one hand, there is a growing, and vigorous literature in the social sciences on the ambiguities and ethical inconsistencies of our approach to nature (Braun and Castree 1998; Darier 1999) and its "privatisation" (Thompson 1997). Within the humanities, too, there are examples of similar concerns. In a recent novel by Julian Barnes (1998), *England! England!*, we find an attempt at "simulated authenticity", through heritage, represented as the clearest example of mass culture. And, today, it is observed that, even before we confronted the moral vacuum of a 'produced' nature, the British observed, uncomfortably, that other cultures could transform nature. This acknowledgment constituted at the time a serious threat to national self-confidence and was most vividly seen in the nineteenth-century march of European imperialism. We find this anxiety profoundly illustrated in a passage from W. G. Sebald's, *The Rings of Saturn*, in which the imperialist armies of Britain and France "discovered", and destroyed, the "man-made" production of nature in China:

> In early October [1860] the allied troops [British and French] happened apparently by chance on the magic garden of Yuan Ming Yuan near Peking, with its countless palaces, pavilions, covered walks, fantastic arbours, temples and towers. On the slopes of man-made mountains, between banks and spinneys, deer with fabulous antlers grazed, and the

> whole incomprehensible glory of Nature and of the wonders placed in it by the hand of man was reflected in dark unruffled waters. The destruction that was wrought in these legendary landscaped gardens over the next few days, which made a mockery of military discipline or indeed of all reason, can only be understood as resulting from anger at the continued delay in achieving a resolution. Yet the true reason why Yuan Ming Yuan was laid waste may well have been that this earthly paradise — which immediately annihilated any notion of the Chinese as an inferior and uncivilised race — was an irresistible provocation in the eyes of [the] soldiers (1998:144).

3. Modern Ecological Thinking and "Produced" Nature

In some respects the modern ecological movement has sought to restore the pre-Enlightenment view of nature in which we do not stand apart from it or seek moral justifications for "our" (human) nature through a better understanding of the abstract rules of science. Green thinking can then be seen as an emergent property of the advance of science itself, one in which a "citizen science" emerges to challenge the authority of experts and politicians (Irwin 1997; Yearley 1997).

It has become increasingly clear that "nature" is not made easier to grasp because we produce it, as an artifact. In fact, it is more difficult to grasp "nature" precisely *because* we produce it — whether through biotechnology, genetic engineering or cultural representations of the natural in everyday life. Nature is now one of the most contested domains of human choice, subject to interpretation and invoked as moral justification in a world of rival epistemologies and "epistemic communities", each claiming legitimacy and validity (Braun and Castree 1998). The very plurality of ethical and religious beliefs about nature, strongly reflected in this book, has become an essential element in the hermeneutic tradition which some critics see as leading to relativism, particularly within the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The "hermeneutic circle", has been criticised for its insistence that we cannot understand the whole before we understand the parts (Mueller-Vollmer 1985).

These deliberations have led to some serious problems for modern ecological thinking. How do we begin to understand "nature" externally, as it were, without recourse to scientific understanding, when this understanding has often served to undermine our relationship with nature itself? This is the dilemma that a realist approach to the environment presently faces.

We need then to begin by dealing adequately with our own ambivalence toward the idea of sustainability. In viewing the way that we invoke the idea of sustainability to describe both conditions within 'natural' ecological systems and human-made cultural artifacts we may be merely apprehending different ways of "producing" nature. Hotels or theme parks constructed according to "sustainable" principles may be more politically or culturally contentious, but are they qualitatively different from "nature reserves" or "protected areas"?

We might focus on economic, cultural and political processes that serve to transform both *material* nature and our consciousness so that terms such as "sustainability" can be

accommodated within rival, and very different, discourses. Later in this chapter the development of global "eco-parks" on the Mexican Caribbean is considered as an example of both the way nature is materially transformed and represented. Before moving to the analysis of this case, however, this chapter considers the potential contribution of a perspective that is not usually linked to these discourses on nature. Sidney Mintz, in his work, has sought to address both the structural conditions behind environmental change and its cultural representations.

4. "Inner" and "Outer" Meanings to Cultural and Environmental Change

In his study of sugar, *Sweetness and Power* (1985), Mintz sought to bring together sugar as a commodity, the product of markets and production processes, and its symbolic dimensions. He distinguishes between what he refers to as the "inside meanings" that people attach to their consumption of food, and the "outside meanings". The inside meanings refer to the conditions of everyday life in which food is consumed. These connotations refer to the way individuals, families and social groups integrate their behaviour through daily or weekly practices, forms of everyday behaviour that provide "familiarity", and cultural meaning to the material world. In this sense the "inside meanings" that individuals attach to goods represent what these goods mean to people themselves through their institutionalised, cultural practices. They constitute the conditions of everyday life and the established practices of consumption.

In contrast, Mintz refers to outside meanings as the structural conditions under which behaviour takes place; in other words, the economic, social and political context of behaviour. The outside meanings establish the outer boundaries for determining, in the case of food and eating, when and how it occurs. This meaning, in this instance, encompasses the hours of work undertaken, places of work, mealtimes, the buying power of households, child-care arrangements and the organisation of leisure time (Mintz 1985). They are the context for consumption. In similar vein, Eric Wolf (1982) has equated these outside meanings with what he calls "structural power". They also parallel roughly with what Anthony Giddens (1984) calls "the organisation of social time-space", part of what he terms "authoritative resources".

Mintz's distinction can be usefully applied to how we view the consumption and production of nature through tourism. At one level, the environment and nature are subject to symbolic interpretation alone, but to appreciate the ambiguity of "eco-tourism" implies considering another dimension, namely that of structural conditions, in which spatial and political systems, and the material conditions under which they function, also acquire cultural significance. The structural binds that determine environmental change and "sustainability" are closely linked to the symbolic representation of "nature". The discussion in the next section of the development of the Mexican Caribbean coast illustrates the need to combine both structural analysis of eco-tourism and the post-structuralist analysis of its representation. Using both approaches can help us to resolve questions about the divergent discourses of sustainability with which the chapter began.

5. Sustainability Discourses on the Mayan Riviera

Interest in sustainability can be linked to two related economic and social processes, or tendencies, that have come to characterise the relationship between human aspirations and the mastery of nature. The first process involves the translation of social behaviour into purely economic values — the "economisation" of society. This current strikes at the legitimacy of one form of "value" (that of the marketplace) over all others. Jurgen Habermas expressed his criticism of this approach in a forceful passage:

> [C]an civilisation afford to surrender itself entirely to the driving force of just one of its sub-systems — namely, the pull of a dynamic ... recursively closed, economic system, which can only function and remain stable by taking all relevant information, translating it into, and processing it in, the language of economic value (1990:43).

The translation of human activities into purely economic terms removes them from both their environmental and cultural contexts — a point to which we return later in this chapter.

The second process is linked to the first, and complements it. This tendency involves the revaluation of nature in another way — by "naturalising" human behaviour — in such a way that human interventions, including environmental planning and management, are regarded as enhancing the *natural* quality, or qualities, of the environment. The paradox is that the use of language to restore "nature" to human-made acts while attempting to give them legitimacy also subjects nature to more human control. In the process, while the rhetoric of public policy and the market becomes naturalised, the environment becomes "socialised", and increasingly divorced from the form that preceded large-scale tourist development. Both these processes — the economisation of society and the socialisation of the environment, are evident in how eco-tourism has developed in Yucatan, Mexico.

The coastal stretch of the Mexican Yucatan Peninsula, south of Cancun, is increasingly referred to as the "Mayan Riviera". To the north lie the resorts of Cancun and Isla Mujeres, both of which have been extensively developed since the 1960s. As Simon (1997:181) points out:

> [O]ne of the great selling points [of Cancun] was that it was considered environmentally friendly ... [I]t was often described as "an industry without smoke-stacks" ... [P]rotecting the environment meant avoiding pollution — industrial waste, smog, the garbage and sewage of the poor. Altering or destroying the natural habitat was not a concern.

The collapse of oil prices in 1981 forced a massive devaluation of the Mexican currency the following year and, as a consequence, heightened efforts were pursued throughout the 1980s and 1990s to earn additional foreign exchange from tourism. Environmental concerns, although frequently voiced, did little to hold back the pace of tourism on the Yucatan coast or the gradual destruction of the coastal habitat. Pollution became a growing

problem. Cancun spawned slums that spread northward and sewage turned the lagoon on which the city was constructed into a diseased sewer, alive with algal blooms and exuding a terrible stench. Ecological problems were mirrored by a growth in criminal activity, including the large-scale laundering of drug money through inflated resort development. Drug barons moved into Cancun in the late 1980s and one of them, Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, was gunned down in Cancun in April 1993.

By the early 1990s Cancun had lost much of its initial appeal, even to tourists. It had developed too quickly, and at too much cost. The developers feared that despite considerable lip service to the environment it was evident that mass tourism, especially from the United States and Europe (which was increasingly the market for Cancun's resort owners), was moving elsewhere. As Cancun lost its glitter, so the tourists began moving south in a quest for the unspoiled beach and the living reef. Cancun had been the principal example of what has been described as an "archipelago of artificial paradises" in tropical Mexico (Loreto and Cabo San Lucas in Baja California, Ixtapa near Acapulco, Puerto Escondido on the coast of Oaxaca). It had always been the jewel in the Mexican tourist crown (Simon 1997).

Gradually, foreign tourists began to follow the Mexican tourists, the back-packers and the beachcombers south of Cancun to the coastal area opposite Cozumel. One town on this coast grew particularly rapidly, Playa del Carmen, which in the 1960s had been a small fishing village, but soon became an area of rapid urban expansion — with a rate of urban growth among the fastest in the whole of Latin America. Playa's ascendancy on the world-tourist stage has given rise to a veritable mythology of its own, encapsulated in this extract from the tourist literature:

> [Playa] was *discovered* by a sixteen year-old boy in the summer of 1966 ... a momentous event which changed forever the face of history for this heretofore small fishing village ... [I]n 1966 Fernando Barbachano Herrero, born of a *family of pioneers*, arrived there and found it inhabited by about eighty people, with a single pier made of the local zapote wood. Fernando befriended landowner Roman Kian Lopez ... and spent the next two years trying to talk him into relinquishing some of his land (Playa 1999, emphasis added).

In January 1968, Barbachano bought twenty-seven hectares of land for just over US$13,000 or six cents a square metre. Tourist development has been so rapid that this land now constitutes just ten per cent of Playa's development and was recently sold for US$325 a square metre. As Playa developed, piers were built for boats, hotels were constructed on the virgin beach and the list of Playa's celebrated "pioneers" grew longer. However, expansion of the resort of Playa Del Carmen was only the first stage in an even more ambitious process of coastal development.

Simon (1997) describes Xcaret, the first of the global "eco-parks" as "a nature-oriented theme park, an hour south of Cancun "... its billboards exhorting visitors to save the planet, conserve water, and put trash in its place" (Simon 1997:190). Xcaret was followed by Xell-Ha, and then Xpu-Ha, as the recently dubbed "Mayan Riviera" resorts blossomed

in imitation of each other, and by turns on an even larger scale, down the coast towards the Biosphere Reserve of Sian-Ka-an on the border with Belize.

On its website Xell-Ha is described as:

> [A] magical place ... This *natural wonder creates the feel of the Caribbean* by inviting you to discover the deep underwater world of the crystal blue seas, the true examples of the *natural* underground rivers produced by this land, the exotic plants and flowers from the botanical garden, a farm with the *original creatures* that inhabit this extraordinary location, and the ancient ruins of the *lost mayan civilisation* (emphasis added).

According to the tourist literature, the eco-parks of Xcaret, Xell-Ha and Xpu-Ha are "legitimate manifestations of the growing concern for the welfare of the planet". It is claimed that they exhibit many of the features of sustainable development in the marine environment: "ecologically-planned" hotels, collaboration with "authentic" environmental organisations, such as the Planetary Coral Reef Foundation (PCRF) and local waste-recycling systems (Playa 1999). However, to its critics such parks have

> no more to do with eco-development than the Bronx Zoo ... [their] success does not increase the value of nature, because all the animals are in cages ... [and] the Mayan village in Xcaret features thatch huts, dugout canoes, and hemp hammocks, but not a single living Maya (Simon 1997:190).

What is clear from rival accounts of the development of the coast, is that the epithets "natural" and "sustainable" carry very positive connotations and, as a consequence, are utilised at every opportunity. Take the following account, again from a tourist magazine, of the activities of one of the coastal "pioneers":

> Ted Rhodes is a local developer and pioneer for ecologically sound technologies, who is attempting to combine state-of-the-art technology, while enjoying the benefits of eco-tourism. He's only been in the Playa area since 1995, but is in the process of planning and developing six major projects ... carrying disdain for the use of the word "eco", which he feels has been an over-abused term for a less than fully-understood concept. Ted describes his ventures as "raw jungle converted with the hand of Mother Nature, to create a positive impact, using Mother Nature's rules ... He works with the *natural* elements of the land, employing natural building materials from agriculture to culture, including water treatment which respects the composition and inhabitants of the land (Playa 1999, emphasis added).

These accounts of eco-tourist development suggest that words such as "nature", "natural" and "sustainable" can be used, to good effect, in a number of ways. By throwing a cordon around part of the coast and enclosing a salt-water lagoon the developers of Xell-Ha were able to brand "nature" with a company name, to privatise it (Thompson 1997). Each of these "parks" provides a variety of tourist facilities — such as restaurants and

shops — that help to sell a product which is, in part, "natural", such as the underground wells (*cenotes*) that tourists descend into, caves and shoals of fish with which they swim. The line between the "natural" and the "human-made" is also blurred in other ways. Some of the local staff are doubtless ethnically Mayan, but the restaurants and cafes that sell "Mayan" cuisine and the bands that play "Mayan" music are an embellishment, if not a counterfeit, of Mayan culture. At one level it appears to work. For instance, people signing the visitors' book thank the resort for offering them the chance "to live among the Mayan people". The reality and the allusion are indistinguishable at this point. The *ethnic* label "Maya" is the exact complement of the *eco* labels such as "nature", "natural" and "sustainable" describing almost every activity that visitors are invited to undertake.

In contrast to the global eco-parks, the Yucatan peninsula also boasts a major UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve, called Sian Ka'an, to the south of the major resorts. The Mexican Government created this reserve in 1986 with an extension of 1.3 million acres. The following year it was designated as a World Heritage Site and ten years later another 200,000 acres were added. Today the reserve accounts for ten percent of the land area of the state of Quintana Roo and contains over 100 kilometres of coast within its boundaries. It includes over 1,000 local Mayan people and 27 archaeological ruins.

However, before declaring this reserve a more "authentic" example of environmental protection than the global eco-parks it is worth reflecting on a number of questions. The Sian Ka'an Reserve is as much an artificial creation as that of Xcaret or Xell-Ha and plays an important role as a sanctuary free from large-scale development. However, most tourists who come to Yucatan and want to experience the natural environment never visit Sian-Ka'an, nor could it withstand mass tourism. To fully appreciate the contribution of reserves like Sian-Ka'an one needs to consider them together with the objects of mass appeal such as Xcaret, Xell-Ha and Xpu-Ha.

These observations suggest that like the descriptions of "eco-friendly" hotels in Playa what we are seeing represented as a manifestation of environmental consciousness on the part of the tourist developers, in the form of eco-parks, is a pre-emptive environmentalism. It is designed to disarm environmental critics and to demonstrate that coastal developers have learned hard lessons from the bad publicity over Cancun. At the same time, these parks absorb increasing numbers of global tourists, many of whom would visit the Yucatan peninsula whether or not the parks existed. Given these circumstances it can be argued that the eco-parks have produced their "own" natural heritage sites, ones capable of withstanding saturation tourism without repelling prospective visitors.

Behind the rhetoric of eco-tourism lie other conflicts of interest over the environment about which most tourists remain oblivious. One example is the opposition being mounted by local peasant families (*ejidatarios*) to the Mexican electricity utility (CFE) that they claim has deforested their land. During the summer of 1999 rallies to condemn these activities were an almost daily occurrence in the region. Similarly, there has been much public criticism of the dangers and risks inherent in speculative development, notably in the construction of sub-standard hotels. In some of these hotels electric cables run dangerously through hotel swimming pools, and visitors are exposed to numerous avoidable hazards denounced in the local newspaper, *¡Por Esto!*. These "ecological scandals" now form part of the daily currency of political discussion on the Yucatan coast and serve to fuel the even

greater insistence on the part of some tourist entrepreneurs that their products are free from the taint of ecological risk and damage.

Following Mintz's distinction the realities of tourism on the Yucatan coast cannot be adequately represented without uncovering the various "inside meanings" which different groups ascribe to their environment. These groups include: local Mayan people working as "hosts" inside resorts and in coastal villages, migrants to the area from other parts of Mexico (e.g., indigenous women from Chiapas who sell crafts on the beaches) and, of course, tourists and developers themselves.

For an example we need look no further than the name for the zone that was, until 1999, *Solidaridad* (solidarity), a name more suggestive of the Mexican Revolution's imagery and mythology than that of global tourism. On the coast of Yucatan now developed for tourism there were relatively few historical examples of social solidarity, such as those in the *henequen* (sisal) zone to the north (Escalante 1988) or the interior villages that figured largely in the so-called Caste War fought between the Maya armies and those of the Mexican state from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Brannon and Joseph 1991). However, the evidence of nineteenth-century Yucatecan opposition to outsiders, supported for cynical reasons by the British, prompted messianic movements of great vitality, particularly those of the so-called 'talking crosses" (Reina 1980:385). One view of the "Mayan renaissance" places these historical oppositions firmly within the camp of contemporary protest over environmental/ethnic abuses in the region, while others caution that both ethnic and environmental struggles in contemporary Latin America have failed to deliver a viable political platform (Ellner 1993). The "inside meanings" attached to the contested discourses of eco-tourism are clearly related to how different groups of people seek to integrate these activities with the performance of everyday life.

Mintz's other analytical category, "outside meanings", can also help us to understand the environmental discourses in Yucatan. Throughout the coastal zone developed for tourism, we find evidence of structural power or the "organisation of time-space" (Giddens 1984) in the way the tourist economy has structurally transformed the environment. This is apparent from the changing "life chances" of individuals and the pivotal economic role that nature affords for tourism. The relatively buoyant labour market in Playa Del Carmen has attracted people looking for work towards the coast and served to reduce local peoples' cyclical dependence on subsistence agriculture in the *milpa* (maize) zone. Tourism has created what is in effect a parallel tourist economy based on the tourist dollar and the vicissitudes of the North American vacation season. In terms of the natural environment, the extraordinary invasive capacity of eco-tourism — through dive centres, cruise ships and off-shore facilities — has served to "privatise" the ocean itself by giving differential access to marine resources usually described in the environmental literature as "open access" (Hanna and Munasinghe 1995; Magrath 1989).

6. Conclusion: Discourses of "Nature" and the Objects of Consumption

This discussion of the Yucatan coast and the emergence of global resorts and eco-parks claiming to be concerned with environmental protection leads to an examination of some of the fundamental ideas discussed earlier in this paper.

First, it is unclear whether a clear distinction can be made between "produced" nature in forms such as eco-parks and protected natural areas. To the south of the "Mayan Riviera" lies the large Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. There are only two ways of visiting this area: by a poor quality dirt road (that very few people take) or via a guided tour. These guided tours, though of restricted size, provide the same activities as those available in the eco-parks: snorkeling, floating down the *cenotes* and night observation of marine turtles. There is also considerable "development" within the reserve and few effective planning controls. Although the environment of the Biosphere Reserve has not been so thoroughly transformed as that of Xell-Ha and the other parks, it can be argued that it is better able to repel further development because of their existence.

Second, it is difficult to specify a "correct" use for terms such as "sustainability" when their application is entirely dependent on context. Much of the impetus for environmental protection on the coast comes from the perceived need to internalise environmental costs along the lines of "ecological modernisation" (Giorgi and Redclift 2000). The interest of a minority of tourist entrepreneurs in cleaner, "greener" tourist facilities is distinguishable — although related — to the wider questions of nature protection in the region. We do not know — and it is a research question well worth pursuing — whether the tourists who visit the coast and express an interest in the environment are more concerned, on the one hand, with the environmental standards in their hotels and swimming pools or, on the other hand, with the welfare of the colonies of dolphins and marine turtles. Clearly "sustainability" discourses are used to make claims for both. In addition, the way in which Mayan culture is invoked is beginning to lead to a "third" sustainability discourse, one that seeks to identify "traditional" forms of sustainable living practiced by the eponymous "Maya".

Third, the different temporal dimensions in which sustainability discourses are employed are paralleled by spatial dimensions. The domain of human choice and consumption is heavily contested, and "eco-tourism", however rhetorical, is a convenient label on which to hang contrary messages. "Nature" is used by some groups to suggest something worth preserving by means of market mechanisms — this is, after all, the logic of global eco-parks. Others seek to regulate and "manage" the environment in such ways that access to "natural" areas can be socially controlled. This is the logic of the Biosphere Reserve and of restricted access. In practice, of course, the two currents often converge. The only person patrolling the principal beach on which marine turtles lay their eggs is an employee of the tourist company developing Xpu-Ha, a development just a few hundred metres down the coast. The "naturalisation" and "socialisation" of nature actually serve to reinforce each other.

This chapter has argued that we cannot easily draw a line under "produced" nature that separates it from the "natural" in the face of global eco-tourist development designed to blur this very distinction. Discourses of the "natural" and "sustainability" increasingly incorporate human concern with public access and recreation as well as conservation goals and need to be understood in terms of the structural processes that affect individual choice and lifestyles. Rather than supporting objective accounts from an "ecological" perspective these concerns from the "demand" side, including the ambiguously defined "eco-tourism", have served to underline the importance of different spatial and temporal perspectives.

Clearly the challenge for research is considerable. We need to develop conceptual tools that address the central problems of how we understand "nature", as well as how we

consume it, and that provide adequate accounts of the plural epistemologies with which "nature" and its transformation are understood. At the same time we should not ignore the structural features at work in eco-tourist developments, such as those on the Yucatan coast, although these are themselves subject to semiotics. The meanings of "Mayan" and "nature" are no longer, if they ever were, of local or parochial significance. They also carry messages across time — from the Caste Wars and the era of "talking crosses" — and across space — from the United States and Europe, the sources of most tourism in Mexico. The search for "discovery" in the era of global tourism, it might be argued, should not be confined to wilderness areas or wildlife expeditions, but should also take the form of new types of consumption. For instance, tourist recreation is an experience that, in the process of transforming nature, transforms the meaning nature has in our lives. Examinations of the different discourses of "nature" on the "Mayan Riviera" as examples of how nature is consumed suggests that by changing nature we may be widening access to it, as well as adding new meanings to "nature" itself.

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