

SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE EMBERÁ  
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES,  
CHAGRES NATIONAL PARK, PANAMA

**Authors:**

Gerald P. Bauer

Natural Resource & Environmental Advisor

US Forest Service, International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Río Piedras, Puerto Rico

Jerry Wylie

Ecotourism and Cultural Heritage Expert

Ingrid Schreiber

Executive Director

Asociación para el Fomento del Turismo (AFOTUR), Panama City, Republic of Panama

Neldo Tócomo

Tourism Marketing and Sales Coordinator

Tranchichí, Emberá Chagres, Emberá Drua Community

Chagres River, Republic of Panama

**ABSTRACT**

The Emberá, one of seven indigenous tribes found in the Republic of Panama, have established small communities along the banks of the Chagres River where they practice traditional subsistence agriculture and hunting and fishing. In 1984 the Chagres National Park was declared and restrictions on agriculture and cultural practices were established, greatly limiting the Emberá's source of income and their livelihood. They were faced with a dilemma: how could they survive? They formed not-for-profit tourism and community development organizations and subsistence agriculture practices were curtailed. They are developing ecotourism programs and they are bettering their communities by improving infrastructure.

**BACKGROUND**

The Emberá is one of seven indigenous tribes found in the Republic of Panama. Historically this tribe comes from the Darien providence located in south-eastern Panama bordering with Columbia, but due to political persecution and security concerns, some of the tribal members began immigrating to other providences in Panama more than 25 years ago. Small Emberá communities were established along the banks of the Chagres River, the primary source of water for the Panama Canal. Here the Emberá practiced traditional subsistence agriculture and hunting and fishing, moving village locations from time to time to find better farming land or hunting and fishing areas. In 1984 the Chagres National Park was established encompassing the area where the Emberá lived. Park regulations put restrictions on agriculture and cultural practices greatly limiting the Emberá's source of income and their livelihood. The Emberá of the Chagres River were faced with a dilemma: How could they survive? Would they have to return to the homeland and face the same concerns for which their ancestors left? Most of the current

community members were born and raised along the banks of the Chagres, this is their homeland.

To face these challenges, the Emberá worked together and formed a not-for-profit sustainable tourism organization and a community development organization. Today they have curtailed their subsistence agriculture practices, which can be destructive to the rainforest. Working with the Panamanian Tourism Bureau, the Panamanian Environmental Authority, local development non-governmental organizations, and international conservation organizations they are developing a Chagres River Basin Development Plan. They are hosting local and international tourists by interpreting their culture and the tropical rainforest in which they live and they are improving their communities by improving drinking water, schools and training for community members.

### THE SITUATION – CHAGRES NATIONAL PARK

The Chagres National Park was legally established on 2 October 1984. It is one of the largest national parks in Panama, covering an area of about 130,000 ha. It contains four life zones (very humid tropical, humid tropical, premontane humid, and premontane rain), provides habitat for an enormous diversity of plant and wildlife species (many of which are threatened or endangered), including more than 500 bird species. The Chagres National Park contains the largest extension of tropical forest in the Panama Canal Watershed. Its rivers are the primary source of fresh water for the Panama Canal and the heavily populated urban areas of Panama City and Colon. The park is mostly remote and unroaded with spectacular wild and scenic areas.

Many small villages and human settlements are found within the park boundaries and in the buffer area around the park, where farmers scratch out a subsistence living. Although subsistence land use is often not compatible with park goals, most of the settlements existed before the park was created, making it difficult to relocate them to other areas.

The park is under the management responsibility of the Panamanian Government's National Environmental Authority (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente, known by its Spanish acronym ANAM). The primary conservation goals of park management are, 1) to protect the watersheds which provide fresh water to the Panama Canal and Panama's major populated areas, Panama City and Colon, 2) to protect the rich biodiversity, both plant and animal, and 3) to provide outdoor recreation opportunities for local and international tourists.

ANAM maintains several guard stations within the National Park, but they lack the human and financial resource needed to provide the desired level of management the park needs for long-term sustainability. They are interested in developing co-management agreements with local communities and NGOs, as well as international NGOs to assist them with certain aspects of park management. They are receiving technical and financial assistance from foreign donors such as the US Agency for International Development, the US Forest Service, the German Aid agency GTZ and from international NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International.

### THE SITUATION- LOCAL INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Four Indigenous Emberá villages have been established in the interior of the Chagres National Park. The first village was established in 1975, several years before the establishment of the park. Today about 330 people live in the four villages. Each village is independent and self governing, but they communicate with each other and work together when necessary.

Each village is comprised of traditional style thatch-roof homes. Each has a community center. Some have schools, elementary potable water systems and small generator operated electrical system.

## SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PLAN

In the late 1990's the Emberá began working closely with the Panamanian Institute of Tourism the National Environmental Authority, and local NGOs to develop a sustainable tourism plan for the Emberá villages of the Chagres River. The goal of this plan is to get the Emberá villages of the Chagres river basin to work together, amongst themselves and with governmental agencies, local tourism operators, and local NGOs, to define viable long-term alternatives to their traditional subsistence agriculture way of life. It attempts to help provide guidelines and direction for tourism development in the Chagres river basin so it is done in a coordinated, team-effort, sustainable manner. This plan outlines the current situation, the obstacles that will be faced by the Emberá in the tourism development process and it lays out a strategy of how to best provide for high-quality tourism that coincides with environmental protection and conservation and enhancement of the Emberá culture. The sustainable tourism plan is dynamic. It will constantly be reviewed, updated, and altered as the local situation changes and as tourism in the area matures.

## EMBERÁ DRUA NGO AND COMMUNITY-BASED MICRO-BUSINESS

The Emberá Drua community, one of the four indigenous communities in the area, started their tourism and community development project in 1996, when they formed a community committee for tourism development. Since 1996 their project has grown and evolved and is now being managed more as a small business. Today they have formed two NGOs, one for tourism (Tranchichi Emberá Chagres ) and one for community development (Wanamera Emberama Chagres). Each NGO has a board of directors and objectives. In addition to learning tourism techniques, they also are devoting efforts to learn small-business practices (such as accounting, marketing, and planning) so they can manage their NGOs in a more efficient and effective manner.

The NGOs have received assistance from the Government of Panama's Authority for micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses (AMPYME) to train them in better business practices and to legally register their tourism project as a community-based micro-business. A local NGO, the Association for the Development of Tourism (AFOTUR), is also providing technical assistance and guidance to the Emberá NGOs to help lead them in the right direction and provide networking and contacts for the development of their projects. Through coordination with AFOTUR, the Emberá have received technical assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Forest Service, and other international donors.

## EMBERÁ DRUA COMMUNITY SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EXAMPLE

The Emberá Drua community offers what they term “cultural ecotourism”. The cultural aspect come from the opportunity for the visitor to observe their traditional way of life and interact with the community members in their community. The eco aspect relates to the opportunity for the visitor to observe and experience nature in the heart of the Chagres National Park rainforest. All tourism to the Emberá Drua is low-impact to the environment and their culture. They practice a “carry it in, carry it out policy”, which means that tourist leave nothing behind.

The Emberá clients include local visitors (student groups and the general public), as well as international tourist (mostly passengers from cruise ships stopping in Panama). From January to May 2002 they had an estimated 2,536 visitors, mostly from the United States and Panama. They offer a variety of activities to the tourists. These include interpretation of their culture and way of life through story telling, short talks, and dance, hiking and bird watching on interpretative trails, swimming in the Chagres river, body painting with native plant dye, meals of local food, traditional fishing in Chagres river, and demonstrations of making traditional baskets and wood carvings.

### IMPACTS FROM TOURISM

As with any project, there can and will be both positive and negative impacts. If the project is to be successful, then the positive impacts must outweigh the negative ones, hopefully by a wide margin. Wylie and Bauer (2002) worked with the Emberá Drua village to review their sustainable tourism program and make recommendations for enhancements. During this analysis they identified positive and negative impacts to the community from tourism (Table1).

Table 1. Positive and negatives impacts of tourism at Emberá Drua village.

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More money is entering into the community</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dependence on tourism – no economic diversity</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Relations with ANAM improved</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Training is limited to the same core group</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Less hunting and fishing in the National Park</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community is dependent on few people</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sanitary management has improved</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community is developing into a consumer society</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Women have more value and are participation in decision making process</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individualism has been promoted by capitalism</li></ul>

- Donations of equipment received
- Social values have improved and alcoholism reduced
- Culture is becoming a business
- Internal fights over roles of traditional government and tourism management

## CONCLUSION

The Emberá have been providing sustainable tourism opportunities to locals and international tourists for just a few years. Their skill level is increasing as they sponsor more tourists and learn how to best meet their clients needs. They are asking for training and technical assistance to help them improve their skills and knowledge even more. They are very aware of their culture and their local environment and how tourism might effect them, in positive and/or negative way. They feel that through sustainable tourism they can preserve their traditional way of life, protect the Chagres National park where they live, and improve their income and lifestyle.

## REFERENCES

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