Previous sustainable tourism research has called for the promotion of community-based tourism as a means of achieving sustainable development goals. Such community-based development has been noted as essential for sustainable practices because of its capacity to benefit local populations while reducing tourism’s negative consequences. Nonetheless, some researchers have warned that community-based tourism, by itself, does not necessarily lead to sustainable practices. This study examines local social interactional elements necessary for the achievement of sustainable tourism practices. Such practices are attainable when certain attitudinal, organizational and/or behavioral conditions are present within a community. Using a case study methodology, this article examines the interactional elements by which residents of La Fortuna, Costa Rica, engaged in sustainable tourism practices. The study was based on the theoretical notion of the community field. It used key informant interviews and participant observation. The study shows how economic, social and environmentally sustainable practices were made possible through community agency, the construction of local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of people within a common locality. Key factors found to enable community agency are strong intra- and extra-community interactions, open communication, participation, distributive justice and tolerance.

Keywords: community agency; sustainable tourism; community-based tourism; Costa Rica; La Fortuna; field theory

Introduction

Community-based tourism refers to local efforts aimed at planning, developing and managing tourism-related opportunities (Murphy, 1983, 1988; Prentice, 1993; Simmons, 1994). Such grassroots efforts have increasingly gained interest in the tourism and natural resource management literatures because of their potential benefits to local populations. Researchers have noted the relevance of community-based tourism for its capacity to provide local societies with economic benefits (Honey, 1999; Slee, Farr, & Snowdon, 1997; Wunder, 2000), participatory justice/democratization, empowerment and sense of ownership (Cole, 2006; Gunn, 1988; Prentice, 1993; Schveyevens, 1999; Sharpley & Telfer, 2002; Simmons, 1994; Tao & Wall, 2009). As a result, community-based tourism has become associated with increased capacities for the mitigation of undesired tourism impacts and/or the achievement of...
desired goals (e.g. conservation; cf. Kruger, 2005; Stem, Lassoie, Lee, Deshler, & Schelhas, 2003; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Because the goals sought by community-based and sustainable tourism efforts are similar (i.e. economic, social and environmental intra- and intergenerational goals; cf. Cole, 2006; Saarinen, 2006; Wall, 1997), some believe community-based tourism inherently leads to sustainable tourism (cf. Okazaki, 2008; Roberts & Tribe, 2008). Others, however, have warned that community-based tourism does not necessarily lead to sustainable tourism (Akama, 1996; Li, 2006; Stem et al., 2003). For sustainable tourism practices to be effectively achieved, communities engaged in tourism development must present an array of particular attitudinal, organizational and behavioral characteristics.

This study examines social interactional elements leading to sustainable practices in a tourism context. Framed around the theoretical notion of the community field (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1991), the study investigates social processes in which local residents engage to achieve community agency. Through community agency, residents exchange ideas and knowledge. This results in informed and commonly agreed-upon decisions. Such a micro-level approach has not previously been used to examine tourism-dependent communities. We believe understanding interactional elements leading to community agency and its relation to sustainable tourism is central to bringing the “community-based” discourse into practice.

To reach the study’s objectives, a case study methodology (Denzin, 1989; Yin, 2009) was applied to examine the community of La Fortuna, Costa Rica. La Fortuna was selected because of its well-known community-led and sustainable tourism practices (Estado de la Nación [EN], 2007; Mikowski, 2007; Sobrado, 2005, 2008).

The paper first presents the conceptual and theoretical foundations associated with field theory and community agency. In this section, the relationship between local resource management, community agency and sustainable practices is presented. Second, the paper describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data. Guided by its theoretical framework, the third section includes the findings, divided into two major sections: (1) elements associated with community agency and (2) community agency’s role in promoting sustainable practices in La Fortuna. The paper then discusses the findings followed by a concluding section.

Framework for analysis: a field-theoretical approach to sustainable development

In this study, the concept of community is viewed from a field-theoretical perspective (Wilkinson, 1991). From this perspective a community is a place where people live and meet their daily needs together (Brennan, 2007; Brennan, Flint, & Luloff, 2009; Bridger, Brennan, & Luloff, 2010; Bridger, Luloff, & Brennan, 2006; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Theodori, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991). To meet its needs, a community comprises a comprehensive network of associations (Luloff, 1998; Wilkinson, 1991). Networks, associations and related channels of communication are essential to establishing effective community efforts. Such efforts occur around, and are made possible by, social interaction. This interaction posits the community as a dynamic, rather than a rigid, entity.

From an interactional perspective, the community consists of numerous and distinct social fields or groups whose members act to achieve various interests and goals. Since social fields are unbounded, an act can occur in more than one field at a time. Despite the fact that fields can overlap, it is possible to identify several more or less distinct social fields through which actors pursue or express particular, place-relevant, interests. The community field connects these diverse groups. This encompassing field is similar to other
individual social fields, except for its pursuit of the common interests and needs of the entire community (Brennan, 2007; Brennan et al., 2009; Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Bridger et al., 2010; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Theodori, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991).

The emergence of the community field depends on local context and, more specifically, on diverse and purposive goal-driven interaction within and toward the community. This field serves to coordinate and unite disparate and often competing social fields into purposive community-wide efforts. It cuts across class lines, organized groupings and other entities within a local population by focusing on the general and common needs of all residents.

Such a focus does not imply that structural or system-level characteristics are unimportant. Indeed, a locality’s economy, sociocultural characteristics and physical resources are essential parts of the community and its residents. Nonetheless, these characteristics serve only as the backdrop for local life and reveal little about the motivations and ability of local people to come together to act. The community, from a field-theoretical perspective, is seen as emerging from the conscious experiences of local citizens coming together to address common needs. How this process, fuelled by interaction, transcends divisions, self-interests and local divides, is central to interactional theory. This does not happen in some utopian context of harmonious agreement, but rather in normal day-to-day settings characterized by conflicting interests. The key is the recognition of overarching common needs and goals that serve as the basis for collective action. The emergence of the community field brings into focus the common interests in aspects of local life (Bridger et al., 2006, 2010).

As local residents and their organizations interact to improve overall community well-being, what has come to be known as community agency emerges (Wilkinson, 1991). Community agency means the construction of local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of people within a common locality. Thus, agency reflects the capacity of people to manage, utilize and enhance the resources available to them in order to address local issues (Brennan, 2007; Brennan, Luloff, & Finley, 2005; Brennan et al., 2009; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Theodori, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991). The key component to community agency is found in the creation and maintenance of linkages and channels of interaction among local social fields that would otherwise be directed toward more limited interests (Brennan et al., 2005; Bridger et al., 2006, 2010; Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Theodori, 2005).

Interactional theory offers an alternative to other perspectives of community-based natural resource management, which have become commonplace in recent years. For example, actor network theory (Latour, 2005; Tábara & Pahl-Wostl, 2007) and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Flora & Flora, 2003; Putnam, 1997) perspectives have both been popular in explaining a wide range of social behaviors.

While widely used and quite popular in both the scientific and popular press, both perspectives provide an incomplete framework for explaining successful, locally based natural resource management. From both perspectives, community is often seen as a given. As a result, a lack of attention is given to the social process leading to attachment, commitment and a desire among local people to collectively work together to meet their common needs. Following this pattern, limited attention is given to the interpersonal relationships, communications and interactions making up the majority of local life. Moreover, both perspectives emphasize regimented social relationships based on roles, responsibilities and complex reciprocal agreements as the source of community action.

In contradistinction, a field-theoretical approach suggests communities, particularly those composed of citizens who care about each other and the place they live in, simply do not respond in such a rational and calculating manner. Indeed, this perspective indicates interactional factors explaining the emergence and development of community are the same in most settings and are at least as important as the routine structural and
ecological factors typically studied. Perhaps what is most unique about the interactional approach is its emphasis on the emergence of community. Unlike other theories of community organization, community is not taken as a given. Instead, it is developed, created and re-created through social interaction (Bridger et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 1991). In this process, the collection of diverse individuals creates an entity whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The emergence of community depends on unsuppressed interaction.

Thus community agency can be seen as a process of building relationships that increase the capacity of local people to unite, act and adapt to changing conditions. Through agency, common needs and the means to address them are identified. Commonly, this entails a process of negotiating, compromising and accepting a series of diverging ideas and interests that reflect the desires of different stakeholders. As a result, local people are linked in a more inclusive manner and are able to consider a wider range of community issues. The culmination of this process is the emergence of community and the development of frameworks for achieving sustainability. The way this process can happen is outlined below and explored in the field study that follows.

The role of the locality: toward sustainable communities

Past research noted the advantages of community-led management of local resources (Bernard, 1973; Bridger et al., 2006; Maser, 1997; Summers, 1986; Warren, 1978; Wilkinson, 1991). Coupled with the failure of broad nationally or regionally focused resource management projects, researchers indicated the need for more community-based responses (Bridger et al., 2006; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005). This reflects the fact that at the local level, responses are more flexible and have the ability to be tailored to unique resources and the cultural and historical context of the locality (Maser & Kirk, 1996; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). Further, at the community level, formal and informal social mechanisms have a stronger capacity to promote the adoption of commonly desired values and attitudes. A community-level approach allows for the design of policies and practices sensitive to the opportunities, constraints and uniquenesses inherent to particular places (Bridger & Luloff, 1999; Cole, 2006; Maser & Kirk, 1996; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). Among such opportunities are goals associated with sustainability.

Efforts oriented toward sustainable economic, social and environmental goals are better oriented when there is an understanding of local resources (e.g. economic, human and physical) and the capacity of residents to manage them (Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006; Okazaki, 2008). Further, the success or failure of resource management is most evident at the local level, providing an optimal capacity for response.

Five dimensions on which the ideal sustainable community can be achieved are outlined by Bridger et al. (2006). First, there should be an emphasis on increasing local economic diversity through entrepreneurial efforts and small-business development and retention. This may be supported with local buying and patronage efforts. Self-reliance, the second dimension, entails the development of local markets, production and the processing of previously imported goods and greater cooperation among local economic entities. The third dimension involves a reduction in the use of energy, together with the careful management and recycling of waste products. This reflects an efficient use of available resources, as well as planning for long-term resource needs. The presence of local culture and familiarity with resources make local decision-making necessary for the sustainable use of these resources. The fourth dimension focuses on the protection and enhancement of biological diversity and careful stewardship of natural resources. Sustainable communities should take care of
the local resources that historically have contributed to their survival. Finally, sustainable communities are committed to social justice and provide for the social and economic needs of all residents.

Achieving sustainable communities through community agency

As previously noted, the benefits associated with locally driven resource management set the basis for sustainable communities. Thus, it is essential that local populations strive to participate effectively and substantially in the decision-making process (Maser & Kirk, 1996). Such local participation entails the active involvement of, and interaction among, local governments, businesses, nonprofits and both long-term residents and newcomers. For local planning efforts to be effective and sustainable, they need to reflect the wishes, the traditions and the knowledge base of the local population (cf. William, 2007). Such efforts need to acknowledge and implement locally defined sustainable practices through broad participation (Parkins, Stedman, & Varghese, 2001).

Broad local participation designed to provide solutions to local needs is both a cause and an effect of community agency. In order for communities to effectively engage in negotiation and act toward desirable sustainable practices, community agency must be present. This is achievable when barriers to interaction, communication and, by extension, participation are removed (see Cole, 2006; Wilkinson, 1991). Through the emergence of community agency, local citizens plan, coordinate and act toward sustainable goals.

Community agency is a central factor in facilitating social wellbeing and is essential to the process of development (Wilkinson, 1991). This is because agency promotes practices aimed at improving widespread interaction and participation in local decision-making and management of local resources. As individuals work together exchanging ideas and seeking common solutions to local problems, the promotion of ideas, values and actions toward sustainable practices can be achieved.

Methodology

This study sought to understand how sustainable practices were achieved in La Fortuna, Costa Rica, through a better understanding of its internal social interactional processes. This was achieved using a case study methodology. Case studies, according to Yin (2009), are optimal when seeking to respond to “why” and “how” certain decisions are taken. Such methodology provides a deeper understanding of the social processes in a locality or localities by analyzing a case or body of cases (Denzin, 1989). Because of this, case studies have increasingly been used in tourism research (see Cai, 2002; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Puppim de Oliveira, 2005; Ryan & Stewart, 2009).

Site selection

Costa Rica has become a well-known tourism destination, as is reflected in its statistics for international arrivals, growing from 761,448 to 1,238,692 annual tourists between 1994 and 2003 (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo [ICT], 2003) to 1,716,277 in 2006 (Ministerio de Planificación Nacional y Política Económica, 2008). The country’s tourism has traditionally been fuelled by the attractiveness of its natural amenities (EN, 2007).²

This case study focuses on the amenity-rich community of La Fortuna (population 13,236), one of the most visited nature-based tourism destinations in Costa Rica. La Fortuna’s tourism is tied to the attractiveness of the Arenal Volcano³ and other natural
attractions including the Arenal Lake, hot-water springs, waterfalls, mountainous terrain and forests.

During the last 30 years, La Fortuna’s economy has increasingly shifted to tourism-related activities in the context of the nation’s declining agricultural sector and the state-sponsored promotion of tourism (Acuña & Ruiz, 2000; Hill, 1990). As in the case of other rapidly growing nature tourism destinations (Coccossis, 2004; Hill, 1990; Kreag, 2001; Macleod, 2004; Miranda, 1997; Telfer & Wall, 2000), La Fortuna experienced rapid economic and population growth after transitioning to tourism. This resulted in changes to local livelihoods, particularly over the past decade.

La Fortuna

The town of La Fortuna is relatively new. Its first settlers – the Quesada and Hidalgo families – arrived in the area in 1915 (Asociación de Desarrollo Integral de La Fortuna [ADIFORT], 2009). These families donated land for the construction of a school, church and soccer field, which started shaping the community.

Today’s La Fortuna is easily covered by foot and is characterized by its main plaza and Catholic Church. La Fortuna’s built amenities include a health clinic, bus station, several supermarkets, hotels and restaurants and five major banks. In addition, La Fortuna has two primary schools and a high school. The closest university is located 32 km away. Tourism-related enterprises and attractions are scattered in the surrounding areas around the center of La Fortuna.

La Fortuna is characterized by numerous community-oriented organizations. These associations, often created and led by community members, are distinct from local governments. Their most prominent organization is the ADIFORT – founded in 1969 after residents returned from a forced relocation caused by the Arenal Volcano’s eruption in 1968. Residents realized they needed to organize in order to help each other and rebuild their town. Coupled with a statewide promotion of community organizations, the ADIFORT was formed with guidance from a North American couple participating in the Peace Corps at the time – Clinton and Jane “Juanita” Kelley. This couple led the process of establishing the ADIFORT by guiding its initial members (Z. Varela, community leader of La Fortuna, personal communication, August 11, 2009). As a community organization endorsed by the government, the ADIFORT must respond to government regulations. Membership of the ADIFORT is free, and provides a voice and vote on projects and policy decisions. The ADIFORT’s funds come from entrance fees to a waterfall owned and managed by the association and by renting properties in the town. Through these funds, the ADIFORT engages in multiple community development efforts. Other organizations in La Fortuna have emerged in recent times as a response to more specific goals. Often membership to these organizations depends on the nature and goals sought.

Many of La Fortuna’s efforts have made the community a flagship for sustainable practices in the country (EN, 2007; Mikowski, 2007; Sobrado, 2008). Popular accounts, newspapers, residents of other tourism-based communities and tourism academics in the country refer to La Fortuna as an ideal example of sustainable tourism development (EN, 2007; Mikowski, 2007; Sobrado, 2005, 2008). Sustainable practices are found within the economic, social and environmental realms at the community and the tourism enterprise level (detailed in the findings section). Such outcomes are associated with strong local ownership and management of tourism-related enterprises (EN, 2007; Sobrado, 2005, 2008).
La Fortuna’s tourism sector is characterized by small-scale locally owned private enterprises (EN, 2007). Damazio, Rodriguez and Gallardo (2007) reported 202 tourism enterprises in the region between La Fortuna and Ciudad Quesada – 180 micro-scale and small-scale and 22 medium-scale and large-scale. They indicated 90% of the micro- and small-scale enterprises were family businesses mainly owned by Costa Ricans (92%). The large majority of these enterprises are hotels. According to ICT (2009), by 2003 La Fortuna had 69 hotels totaling 855 rooms and providing jobs for 487 individuals.

Data collection and analysis
Data for this study was collected via key informant interviews (KIs; Krannich & Humphrey, 1986; Marshall, 1996; Tremblay, 1957) and participant observations conducted between November 2007 and February 2008 and in April 2008. KIs were sought on the basis of their knowledge of and active involvement in the community regardless of their position or socioeconomic status. A group of residents known to the researcher were asked to provide contact information of individuals in the community fitting the above description. The names provided served as the first round of KIs. Following a modified snowball procedure, interviewed KIs were asked to provide contact information for at least three other KIs. A total of 34 KIs including a broad range of positions and fields were interviewed (see Table 1).

To complement the information gathered in the KI interviews, participant observation was conducted. Such a method allows for the description, classification and interpretation of a particular group’s way of life (Denzin, 1989). Combined with other data collection methods, participant observation enhances the understanding of the group being studied (Denzin, 1989, p. 157). Methods of participant observation included the following: conversations with local residents and extra-local persons knowledgeable of the community; reviewing local brochures, bulletin boards and newspapers; examination of secondary data from the National Census and Statistics Institute, university studies and Costa Rica’s State of the Nation publication; attending local community meetings; and observation of daily activities.

The interview guide included open-ended questions about the community’s past and present characterization (resident’s view of the community including its local economy and physical environment), community satisfaction, concerns about the community, perceived quality of life, future expectations, tourism development (including the role of tourism in the economy and the role of the government and the community in tourism development) and the impacts of tourism (see Appendix A).

Data was analyzed and interpreted following a content-analysis methodology (Babbie, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 1989) and theory-driven qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman, 2003). Such an approach performs the analysis and interpretation of data based on recurrent themes and sub-themes associated with a chosen social theory. In this study, interviews were analyzed seeking elements associated with social interaction (e.g. communication) and whether (and how) these elements were reflected in the engagement of sustainable practices.

Each interview was translated (from Spanish to English) and transcribed by the researcher who is familiar with the language and culture of the study area. As the researcher reviewed each interview, a summary table was created listing the different cases (KIs listed on the rows and the different questions/themes listed in the columns). For each individual case, the different sub-themes that emerged were listed and color-coded to differentiate them. These are reported in the findings section supported by quotations from the
Table 1. Positions by field and number of KIs by community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality representative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University professor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social security representative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private businesses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel owner</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations representative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer/stockbreeder</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law-reinforcement official</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribunals of justice representative</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community development association</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butcher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welder</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales clerk</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

interviews. The findings are reported in two sections: an analysis of the elements associated with community agency and an interpretation of community agency’s role in the promotion of economic, social and environmentally sustainable practices (see Wolcott, 1994).

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability were achieved through reflexibility and triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Reflexibility was attained by contrasting created theme listings from the interview with notes taken during the participant observation phase. The researcher found consistency among the topics uncovered by both mechanisms of data collection. Triangulation was achieved by reporting and discussing findings with academics and consultants from nongovernmental organizations once the KIs were described, analyzed and interpreted (Flick, 2005; Wolcott, 1994). The author’s familiarity with the country and study communities allowed for easy identification of such individuals.

Findings

Elements associated with community agency

Strong social interaction

In La Fortuna, the capacity to actively interact has been historically present. According to respondents (many of whom were direct descendents of these first settlers), the town’s founders
understood the value of having common areas where community interactions could occur. They stressed the importance of building community, in contrast to just a locality. Evidence of this was their donation of land for the creation of key community institutions including a school, church and a football (soccer) field. Such notions, according to respondents, have always been part of the guiding values and ideas of La Fortunans. Often respondents noted places and events where people mingled and spent time together. A resident son of the first settlers commented on the communal practices along the Christmas season:

When I came here this was totally a family-oriented town and it stayed like that for a long time. We spent Christmas in family, we prayed the rosary, and one visited all the homes in the community and ate tamales together.

Community-wide participation

In La Fortuna, residents’ strong interaction materialized in community-wide participative efforts. A representative of the ADIFORT commented on the importance of community participation:

Goals are highly associated with the level of participation of single persons and enterprises with the community. If individuals lock themselves in their own world and forget that there are community associations to which they have to belong and collaborate, that would deter the process. On the other hand, if individuals become engaged to at least one community organization, things will work nicely. If you actively participate as seen here . . . we wouldn’t have a gym, we wouldn’t have a soccer field, a running track, a cemetery, a park. All this requires community participation. As long as I do not want to participate, the town goes backward. If we stay enclosed in our houses and see development pass by the street, no one will hear what your needs are nor what your intellectual contribution is.

Participative efforts favored the creation of numerous community organizations. A hotel owner and active resident commented on this:

We formed the Community Development Association (ADIFORT), the Association of Micro Entrepreneurs (AMITURFOR), the Association for the Protection of the Arenal River (ADECLA), the association for the protection of the quality of water that we consume and some businesses that protect the environment.

Leading these efforts is the ADIFORT, considered among the strongest community development association in Costa Rica according to the residents interviewed. Residents are encouraged to attend meetings and discuss local interest projects, promoting local widespread participation.

In addition to generating economic benefits to support its projects, the ADIFORT is concerned with the improvement of La Fortuna and neighboring communities’ living conditions. An active member of the ADIFORT commented on this:

We [ADIFORT] bought the land where the civic festivities always take place. We also have a building here in the middle of the La Fortuna that we rent out for offices; and we also have a commercial center. Additionally we manage La Fortuna’s cemetery and also we are in charge of the Central Park of La Fortuna, the construction of all the sidewalks, road paving in collaboration with the MOPT [Ministry of Transportation and Public Infrastructure] and the San Carlos Municipality. We also help the Fortuna’s schools and also adjacent district’s schools. ADIFORT is involved in conservation programs, health programs, and many other programs. As we have resources, our general meetings never lack members, all of them with the best intentions to improve the region.

Broad local participation also takes place in La Fortuna in terms of entrepreneurial development. A large majority of La Fortunans took over the role of developing
tourism-related enterprises. As a result, community members own the majority of the businesses serving the tourism sector.

Open communication

Residents interviewed often commented about key decisions made at the community level. Formal (i.e. through meetings and associations) and informal (i.e. conversations carried out in the main plaza) mechanisms were used to communicate with others. One of the most relevant decisions adopted by the community after major consideration and communication was land appropriation. Residents agreed with and communicated with each other about the importance of maintaining ownership for ensuring successful tourism opportunities. A long-term resident commented on the decision to maintain their land:

We had the great advantage of entering the tourism activity two years after the rest of the country did. So when the big investors came to buy land we had already learned from the experience of other areas that sold their land at very low prices. This was the case of coastal areas that sold their land to foreigners. So when they [buyers] came here, we told them: “yes, we’ll sell but at this price” [exorbitant price] and they did not buy. They waited for us to sink but we didn’t, we developed projects ourselves.

The decision to apply for large amounts of credit was also a topic of discussion among concerned Fortunans. Residents discussed the benefits of obtaining credit and developing their own tourism enterprises while encouraging others to apply for loans.

Good communication was also present between organized associations like the ADIFORT and the local government. According to respondents, the government often failed to effectively resolve problems resulting from the changes brought about by tourism-led growth. However, through continuous discursive local communication, many of the public institution’s duties were assumed by the ADIFORT or were handled through a new collaboration with the local government. Through this, changing and growing needs were met. A local leader commented on the benefits of maintaining open communication with the local government:

The good thing is to keep a good communication with the government institutions. The big problem would be to divorce from them. Even though the response might be slow, we still need to keep searching for that response. If you move away from the process, things get more complicated.

Tolerance

Because of its improving living conditions and job opportunities, La Fortuna has become a town attracting many newcomers (migrants). Respondents often noted their high levels of tolerance and acceptance with newcomers to the area. According to respondents, in La Fortuna foreigners were welcome as long as they had desires and aspirations for personal and communal improvement. A lawyer commented on La Fortunans’ tolerance and acceptance of others:

There is no culture clash in Fortuna, everyone is accepted as long as they know how to adjust. The Fortunan is not a person who displaces others.

Opposite to the trend in the country, a hotel owner talked about the positive relationship between locals and Nicaraguan migrants:

Around 40–50% of the employees here are Nicaraguan. They are treated as equals. They are hard workers.
A sales clerk noted the reasons for the high levels of tolerance in La Fortuna:

They [immigrant workers] are welcomed because we, from La Fortuna, are very open people, very generous, there is a lot of solidarity. The people who come from other places do not know those values.

As noted by Wilkinson (1991), the interactional characteristics of strong community interaction, participation, open communication and tolerance are elements of community agency. As learned here, La Fortuna exhibited these elements, which when taken together, contributed to strong community agency. La Fortuna’s strong community agency resulted in the creation of economic, social and pro-environmental efforts aimed at improving town, businesses and neighboring communities’ sustainability.

**Agency and sustainable economic goals**

*Locally owned tourism enterprises*

Community agency played a large role in enabling La Fortunans to keep their land. Residents met and discussed the risks associated with selling land and its consequences for the ownership and management of tourism resources. Residents also encouraged others to obtain credit to invest in tourism enterprises. Additionally, respondents indicated how they often communicated with others about the necessary skills to run successful tourism enterprises while sharing their positive and negative experiences. Through community agency, a large proportion of the community embarked on the shared quest of developing tourism in La Fortuna. This resulted in local development of direct and indirect tourism-related businesses (see Table 2).

*Economic diversification and self-reliance*

Some residents indicated having kept their traditional agriculture-related activities parallel to developing tourism. While tourism was seen as an optimal way to generate income, respondents acknowledged the importance of a diversified economy. A woman community leader noted the importance of tourism, yet recognized the role played by other economic activities:

Table 2. Sustainable practices achieved in La Fortuna.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable economic practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locally owned tourism enterprises deterring leakages/promoting local profits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversified economy through creation of local tourism and agriculture businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliance through local production and consumption of goods and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive justice through overall local distribution of economic benefits.</td>
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The economy in La Fortuna is very good and obviously revolves around the tourism activity at this moment. Nevertheless, other economies like the farm, the land, the dairy cattle have not been taken for granted but obviously with a dominance of the tourism activity. But the traditional activities like livestock and agriculture still plays a role.

Talking about the benefits of tourism, a hotel owner who diversified from dairy farming noted the following:

Hotels provide a lot more than dairy requiring less labour. For instance, I rent cabins for $50/day. That times my four cabins is $200 in one day. For me to obtain that kind of money milking cows, I would have to milk a lot of cows.

Residents also promoted the consumption of locally produced goods as a way to retain economic benefits in the region. Often, hotel owners mentioned how they purchased dairy, fruits and vegetables from other Fortunans. Further, they saw this practice as a key for improving the quality of production, as locals were forced to compete with extra-local producers. As a result, the local economy grew in quantity and quality.

Distributive justice

Respondents indicated how the combination of local entrepreneurial skills (see Sobrado, 2005) and established tourism businesses contributed to a good distribution of economic benefits within the community and greatly reduced opportunities for such benefits to leak from the community. One hotel owner proudly spoke of the uniqueness of La Fortuna as it provided opportunities for everyone:

I really believe that this is a place in Costa Rica where the distribution of the money, or the income resulting from development, is well distributed . . . some have focused on creating their hotels while others complemented their agriculture and livestock production, with hotels and other tourism activities. Previously we did not have a lot of jobs, currently we have a lot since tourism has grown rapidly. The labour is local, so you can see marginalized neighbours nowadays with nicer looking houses, as they have been improved and painted. One can see it in the commercial activities. One can see it in the persons, their way of dressing. Families that were economically suppressed, nowadays have their motorcycles, their vehicles.

With the establishment of tourism-related businesses, La Fortuna has diversified and increased its self-reliance. When coupled with their perceived well-distributed economic benefits, these were all seen as important sustainable economic practices by the local population.

Agency and sustainable social goals

Establishment of local social response mechanisms

In La Fortuna, changes resulting from tourism development shaped the town’s living conditions. Strong community agency allowed residents to respond to some of such changes. Residents decided to implement desired social goals (see Table 2) reflecting their understanding of the potential consequences associated with tourism development. A hotel owner added the following:

The community has integrated itself. It is not a community that only thinks about making money. We are a community that also thinks about prevention, so that in the future we have a sustainable tourism in time. For instance, ADIFORT is sustained by admission fees to the waterfall. As more tourism comes, more money goes into it. In return, ADIFORT gives money to the community, it never asks for money.
With leadership from the ADIFORT, community social goals included the design and maintenance of their main plaza, the installation of street signals, the creation of community sport facilities, the provision of resources to local law enforcement entities to increase security and the general cleanliness of the town. Other social projects sought by the community through the ADIFORT included financing the current construction of a primary school gymnasium, the provision of materials for the construction of classrooms for the school of a local marginalized neighborhood, donations for the payment of marginalized resident’s electric services and assistance to low-income pregnant women. In addition, La Fortunans consistently mentioned their opposition to the establishment of tourism enterprises dedicated to gaming, gambling and sex – all seen as detrimental to social life in La Fortuna. These goals were not only seen as relevant for improved community life but also as a key to the protection of the social environment that often attracts tourism to an area.

**Agency and sustainable environmental goals**

*Community-wide environmental practices*

Respondents noted the role tourism played in promoting consciousness for protecting the natural environment (see Table 2). Interviewed Fortunans referred to the increasing number of local organizations created to protect their water and forest resources. The ADIFORT was currently in the process of constructing a sewage treatment facility for La Fortuna and nearby communities, and a water treatment plant, reflecting their concerns about health and environmental manners. Several organizations have also implemented environmental education and recycling programs in local schools. Consequently, La Fortuna has received national and international environmental awards for their sustainable efforts. A small hotel owner commented on this:

> More consciousness about recycling, protection, and reforestation is being created. I would say from 1 to 100, we are now a 60, but we are conscious that nature is what brings tourism. Before the tourism boom there was 0 conscience of the environment. Now La Fortuna has never been a dirty place, but today we think more about recycling.

*Enterprise-wide environmental practices*

From an entrepreneurial perspective, tourism business owners proudly spoke about their adoption of recycling and reusing programs and zero carbon emissions projects. These respondents often commented on the different projects they were involved with, which sought to protect their natural environment. The spokesman of a large hotel noted the following:

> We are trying to be pioneer in neutral carbon. We also classify our waste, use organic fertilizers and bug sprays, and of course we recycle. But we are not the only ones, the whole region is compromised to these efforts: seeking conservation for the whole region.

**Discussion**

The case study of La Fortuna could be considered an exceptional example of a community with high levels of strong community-oriented interaction, open communication, participation and tolerance and distributive justice. All of these elements are key for the emergence of community agency and the promotion and establishment of locally driven goals and actions (Wilkinson, 1991).

Strong interaction and open communication resulted in exchange of ideas, support for the adoption of key decisions and the emergence of collaborative associations. According
to Cole (2006), communication and sharing of information is key for the removal of barriers created by individual’s lack of knowledge and access to information, low confidence and limited capital and skills. Additionally, in La Fortuna, tolerance and distributive justice reduced barriers to communication and interaction while further promoting employment opportunities for newcomers. All these elements materialized in broad participation in La Fortuna.

Broad participation is of particular importance in a context reflecting tourism-driven change (Saarinen, 2006; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Widespread participation ensures informed decisions reflecting common concerns, needs and wants are made when planning community goals (Cole, 2006; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). Cole (2006, p. 631), citing Arnstein (1969) and Pretty (1995), noted different levels of participation, ranging from “being consulted to being able to determine every aspect of the development process.” In La Fortuna, participation was reflected in different levels ranging from local participation in community meetings (involvement) to ownership and management of local resources. Such varied participation provided La Fortunans with the capacity to direct change in their community (citizen control). In the case of La Fortuna, designed goals reflected locally defined sustainable practices.

From an economic standpoint, sustainable practices are highly dependent upon access to resources. Such access provides the capacity for local populations to meet their material needs as it provides the means for survival. Shuman (1998) suggested sustenance could occur locally through self-reliance.8 For local sustainable economic development, self-reliance is of particular importance because

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\ldots \text{global economic forces and the internationalization of markets have proven to have devastating consequences on community life. In many areas the industrial base has been wiped out and little has replaced it except a growing service sector that, at best, provides low-wage, unstable employment. (Shragge, 1997, p. 7)}
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According to Shuman (1998), local sustenance should be accomplished by the establishment of community-based productive, financial and commercial institutions. Through such institutions, communities can develop the required economic base that could potentially lead to sustainable outcomes. Such an approach seeks to change the structure of a community while building institutions owned and managed locally (Shragge, 1997). As a result of controlling such mechanisms of production and distribution, the formation of capital needed for self-reliance is attained.

Holden (2008) and Sharpley and Telfer (2002) have noted that local ownership of economic resources facilitated resident’s control of their own lives through mutual efforts to solve shared problems including income distribution, poverty, unemployment and extra-local dependence. In resource-dependent rural communities such as La Fortuna, direct access to natural resources is associated with improved economic conditions. In a tourism-based context, these resources included the land and capital necessary for investing in direct and indirect tourism-related businesses.

La Fortunans established such businesses as a result of early communal decisions of land appropriation and investment. This not only resulted in larger and well-distributed economic benefits for its residents but also provided the capacity to control, manage and respond to the changing conditions in the community resulting from tourism-led development.

As noted in the case of La Fortuna, through community agency, residents organized and established desired social programs aimed at responding to increased social problems associated with population and infrastructural growth commonly associated with tourism.
(see Brown & Swanson, 2003; Coccossis, 2004; Frederick, 1992; Krannich & Petzelka, 2003; Swarbrooke, 1999; Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Such social programs directly benefited its citizens by providing assistance to residents in need. Further, such efforts indirectly benefited the community by ensuring better local living conditions, which makes visiting La Fortuna more attractive to visitors, therefore increasing the town’s further and ongoing success.

From an environmental perspective, protection of the natural environment is a key component of sustainable development (Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005). This is particularly important for rural, natural, resource-dependent communities, whose wellbeing is highly linked to their natural environment (Field & Burch, 1988; Flint & Luloff, 2005).

Respondents routinely indicated that their environmental attitudes had shifted since tourism began. According to KIs, La Fortunans have learned to appreciate nature. Their attitudes toward nature shifted from being purely utilitarian to a more appreciative framework. This shift resulted from interacting with tourists who came to the area attracted by the large natural wealth present in the region and learning from those visitors how special their area is.9

In La Fortuna, community agency resulted in the dissemination of pro-environmental attitudes and actions in the community as a whole as well as in the tourism enterprises. Sustainable goals were often communicated and discussed in formal and informal gatherings. With time, residents exhibited a shifting and growing concern toward protection of the natural environment. As in the case of other attitudes and behaviors (e.g. social), sustainable practices aimed at the protection of the environment were communicated, promoted and adopted in La Fortuna. This resulted in La Fortuna’s protection of nature, which in turn sustained its natural amenity-driven tourism.

Conclusions

This study examined the necessary elements for sustainable tourism development using a field-theoretical perspective. Such a framework posits community agency as the key element enhancing a community’s capacity to adapt to changing conditions seeking the overall good of the community through the establishment of common goals.

As shown here, La Fortuna provides an example for other places concerned about improving local community quality of life through the adoption of sustainable practices. Such practices are defined and put in motion by communities with strong community agency, a result of their strong interaction, open communication, participation, distributive justice and tolerance. Local community agency allowed La Fortunans to adapt to changing conditions and at the same time guide how tourism-based development was conducted in their community. By maintaining ownership and control of resources, residents gained the capacity to control, manage and respond to tourism-driven changing conditions (i.e. population growth, increased crime, destruction of the natural environment and increased vehicular traffic and pollution).

Because of how highly intertwined the community was and is with tourism, sustainable practices here reflected those affecting overall community conditions (i.e. economically, socially and environmentally) in addition to just the tourism sector. Sustainable efforts were aimed at maintaining the social and environmental integrity of the community and its surroundings while at the same time improving their tourism-based economy. Through community agency, La Fortuna channeled the economic growth resulting from tourism toward the community while establishing sustainable goals. Residents routinely discussed
the problems faced by their and other tourism-based communities and promoted alternative ways to pursue their goals.

Attained goals reflected attitudinal, organizational and behavioral elements necessary for communities to successfully engage in sustainable practices. Communities seeking to engage in such practices must have pro-interactional and tolerant attitudes between and within stakeholders. Through such attitudes, stakeholders can engage in collaborative efforts aimed at planning desired outcomes as barriers are reduced.\(^{10}\) In the case of La Fortuna, desired outcomes reflected sustainable goals. Such goals were clearly part of their discourse (see EN, 2007). This is of particular importance for sustainable tourism development, as all efforts undertaken by a community do not necessarily have to follow sustainable practices. Hence, in addition to required attitudes toward interaction and tolerance, sustainable tourism development requires attitudes promoting locally defined sustainable practices. As a result, such attitudes materialized in organizational efforts seeking to implement and manage the desired and agreed upon sustainable goals. In La Fortuna, organizational efforts were evident in the large number of local organizations created for the attainment of sustainable goals. Finally, behavioral elements for sustainable practices included effective and continual participation in localized sustainable efforts.

Such efforts reflected intra- and intergenerational equity in the use, management and distribution of economic, social and environmental resources. For this to happen, communities must have the capacity to control and manage change while seeking the overall betterment of the community. Such improvement extends beyond economic means and individualistic interests and must reflect social and environmental goals for the common good. This can only happen when a community displays strong purposive interactional elements.

From a field-theoretical approach to community, La Fortuna provides an example for understanding the mechanisms necessary to attain community agency. The existence of the community field and its associated agency can only happen with the existence of different social fields characterized by the promotion of particular interests and purposes. These different social fields are then harnessed through the community field (Wilkinson, 1991). The way in which the community field materializes is through the creation of efforts aimed at the overall improvement of community life. In La Fortuna, this happened through the creation of community organizations like the ADIFORT. Such organizations provided the mechanisms to represent the needs of the entire community while seeking its wellbeing.

The relevance of field theory for sustainable tourism development lies in its capacity to explain how community residents display a purposive interest in their locality. Such interest goes beyond reciprocal feelings toward other community members or the community. The community field and its resulting community agency are the result of harnessing the community’s different social fields by the desire to improve the community. It requires open communication and widespread public involvement as central parts of any effort to achieve sustainable tourism (Cole, 2006). As a result, participative and collaborative efforts can be traced to purposive interactional actions that reduced barriers to communication.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that community agency is not an end, but a process that needs to be nurtured. In La Fortuna, ownership and management of local economic resources played a large role in giving residents control of their community. This was a result of strong agency. Yet, such ownership can be a double-edged sword in a tourism context. La Fortuna has been experiencing recent declines in local levels of involvement in community-wide efforts. According to respondents, this reflected the commitment of La
Fortunans to provide tourists with an outstanding tourism experience. As a result, residents spent long hours managing their tourism businesses, affecting their levels of participation in community programs and social and family interactions. While La Fortunans still display a strong commitment to their social and natural environment, they are now more likely to provide financial support while expecting others to take the lead on such efforts. Agency, the most important element leading La Fortunans to development as opposed to simple economic growth, has diminished in recent years. This had led to recent concerns about declining levels of religious participation, family interaction and community integration.

Community agency goes beyond increased participation in decision-making. It entails the inclusion of diverse stakeholder’s ideas and the aspiration of goals promoting equity and sustainability. Reduced community agency, reflected in deterred communication, interaction and participation could lead a community to undesired outcomes. From this study we learned community agency’s needs are to be protected in order to maintain sustainable development goals. Planners and policymakers, and most importantly community members, must keep in their agenda the promotion of interactional programs and activities which encourages community agency. These can range from local civic festivities to educational campaigns aimed at fostering neighborly practices. While structural elements including infrastructure and economic resources are essential elements for any tourism development project, interactional resources are key to attaining sustainable development goals.

It is also important to understand that the interactional elements present in La Fortuna are the result of historical and cultural elements intrinsic to them. Such elements are hardly policy malleable. Yet, understanding the history and culture of a specific location is key for engaging in efforts to learn its present situation.

Interactional elements of a community can be modified. Knowing positive and sustainable outcomes can and do occur in communities, like La Fortuna, can serve as guidance for other communities in similar or related situations. Understanding the elements needed for the emergence of community agency and its relations to sustainable tourism is critical for the promotion of desired outcomes in other communities around the world. This is particularly important when trying to promote locally led efforts. Not in every occasion communities will engage in efforts aimed at betterment of the entire community. Limited interaction and communication coupled with concentration of power can lead to undesired outcomes. Here is where the understanding of local social interactional processes is critical.

Future studies should use the findings of this study to examine the roles of leadership, power structures and distinct social groups in promoting or deterring social interactional elements. While this study examined the role such interactional elements played in community agency, predictors of such elements can serve to better understand the complex relationships within a community’s social life.

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**Notes**

1. Following the three pillars of sustainability (Kates et al., 2005; WCED, 1987), sustainable tourism practices will be understood here as those efforts defined and designed by a community in the quest to gain economic benefits and self-reliance, social responsibility and equity and implementation of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors as they engage in tourism development.

2. In 2005, 78% of the tourists who visited Costa Rica did so primarily to engage in sun and beach activities and 62.3% reported exploring the country’s flora and fauna (ICT, 2006). Similarly, EN (2007, p. 202) indicated the main reason why tourists visit Costa Rica was its ecotourism activities, non-degraded environment and beaches.

3. A study conducted by the marketing department of Costa Rica’s Board of Tourism (ICT) indicated that 85% of the area’s tourists visit the Arenal Volcano.


5. La Fortuna is a district within the Cantón of San Carlos. The local government or municipalidad of which La Fortuna is a part is located in Cuidad Quesada, head of the Cantón of San Carlos, approximately 40 kms away.

6. Micro- and small-scale enterprises have been defined by the researchers as those with one to four and five to 20 employees respectively. Medium- and large-scale enterprises consist of 21 to 100 and 100 and above employees respectively (Damazio et al., 2007).

7. The information provided by these informants, while used as a validation mechanism, is not reported in the finding’s section.

8. Self-reliance here does not equate to being completely auto-sufficient but means having the economic capacity for local actors to produce and trade without being completely limited by extra-local constraints.

9. A small portion of respondents argued that environmental attitudes in La Fortuna were more driven by economic desires rather than by a true shift in attitudes. Despite this assessment, the number of local organizations seeking to protect natural resources in the area has dramatically increased over the past 10 years.

10. As previously indicated, reduced barriers do not equate to reduced conflict. Interactional theory considers conflict as part of the process of negotiating the goals by the different community stakeholders. The end result is what is relevant here, which is defined by increased local input in decision-making.

**References**


Appendix A. Tourism growth and quality of life key informant interview

ID #: ____________________ Date: ____________________
Time: ____________________ Community: ____________________ (urban □ / rural □).

1. First, how would you characterize La Fortuna?
2. How would you describe quality of life in this community?
3. How would you describe the local economy of this area?
4. How would you describe the people in this community? Would you say the residents of this community are satisfied or not? Why?
5. How would you describe the physical environment of this area?
6. How would you characterize this area 10 years ago?
7. As a person knowledgeable about this community, do you have any concerns about the community? Which and why?
8. What would you like to see in the future in this community? Why?

Now, we would like to discuss some tourism-related issues with you.

9. What is the role of tourism in the area’s economy?
10. Which are the major tourist attractions and what do you know about them?
11. What role has the government and organizations taken in local tourism development?
12. What role has the community taken in local tourism development?
13. How does tourism impact this region? (Positive/negative impacts to the economy, community and the environment.)
14. What potential do you see for additional tourism development in this region? What would you promote and what would inhibit this type of development?