Title of the Story: Salto del Limón: A Community’s Natural Heritage

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Country: Dominican Republic

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)

☐ Localizing the destination supply chain
☐ Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
☒ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☐ Tourism Reset & Recovery
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DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced
What was the problem/issue solved with the good practice?

The Natural Monument Salto del Limón is an iconic resource in the province of Samana, known both nationally and internationally. A protected area of 18 km² that safeguards important sources of surface water, fragments of tropical forests, and local biodiversity. It provides environmental goods and services to the destination and it is the main axis of the local economy in the Municipal District of El Limón. This natural monument is a success story of what can happen when communities come together and work towards achieving the same goal.

At the beginning of the 90’s different organizations in the destination recognized the tourism potential of the region and came together with the neighboring communities to develop an ecotourism attraction. One of the main issues, and at the same time opportunity, was ensuring that this attraction was developed in a way that broke away from the tourism development paradigms of the time, where local communities were excluded and saw very little benefits. Another issue is that the community lacked tourism know-how and environmental-related knowledge. The community made a switch to live from the land in a different way through the development and care of a tourism resource in a sustainable manner, getting everyone on board and stopping unsustainable practices has been a constant challenge.

The progressive development of this successful destination has been an ongoing learning and adaptation process for the communities involved. They’ve been so successful that the community and the attraction are facing the issue of too many visitors (growing from almost 40,000 visitors a year in 2009, to around 70,000 in 2018), which have also impacted the community and the environment. The success has led to discord among neighboring communities. As people have witnessed the economic benefit that Salto del Limón generates, it has led to the proliferation of unregistered and untrained tour guides and service providers, resulting in a decline of tourist satisfaction, price wars or improvised guidance practices that are harmful to the environment.

Salto del Limón has been affected by environmental impacts within the protected area. Deforestation, people-started fires upstream of the waterfall, intensive cattle ranching in surrounding areas, as well as extensive droughts over recent years have threatened the natural attraction, and particularly in the years 2015 and 2019 it had a major flow reduction.

Methods, steps and tools applied
How was the good practice implemented?

To address the issues mentioned above, since 1996, important efforts have been made to bring the local communities together and raise awareness of the importance of the Salto as a protected area and as a tourism resource that can benefit the economic activities in their communities. One of the first main steps was the foundation of the Communitarian Association of Ecotourism Salto del Limón, ACESAL. ACESAL is an association that brings together entrepreneurs who benefit economically from tourism activities in Salto del Limón. Its main objective is to actively participate in the sustainable management of ecotourism activities of the destination and its surroundings in coordination with the Environment Ministry and private sector.

To this day the work that ACESAL and other local organizations have done, has allowed the local communities to come together and work in the same direction for the development of a successful tourism attraction. To bring awareness a lot of measures have been taken such as the creation of guidelines for sustainable tourism, support, and strengthening of the micro-enterprises from the community that works with the Salto, numerous reforestation campaigns and activities.

Trails and entrances were created at different strategic points, to regulate the tourist activity and its effect on the protected area. The communities, also aware of the importance of better ecotourism management, organized themselves to maintain the trails and make them accessible for tourists and horseback riding. One of the most innovative measures was the creation of “paradas.” The paradas are micro-enterprises, or official stops/entries, that were established at these strategic points and are run by local community members. The paradas offer the visitors with local certified guides, horseback riding tours, restrooms, beverages, local cuisine, and artisanal products.

The support of organizations such as the Samaná Tourism Cluster has also been fundamental. ACESAL is currently part of it, which has allowed them to escalate the concerns and needs of the protected area to a multi-stakeholder group, such as the Cluster. This provides ACESAL with a more accessible channel of communication with public actors such as the Ministry Environment. The Cluster has also supported training to improve the business skills of tourism entrepreneurs, and facilitating processes to empower them.

Key success factors

What helped you tackle the issues?

- The inclusion and participation of the local communities as part of the development of the tourism resource. And the creation of ACESAL. This has allowed for the establishment of collective prices among entrepreneurs, the organization of ecotourism training for the people engaged in this economic activity, and other activities that have allowed local communities to work together in the same direction.
- The empowered communities have taken responsibility and become the environmental watchdogs of the protected area. Through ACESAL they have a co-management agreement for the protected area with the Ministry of Environment of the Dominican Republic.
- The creation of the parada’s. Not only do they help ensure order and the quality of the tourism offer and experience. They also ensure that most of the economic benefits go back directly into the communities. Currently there are 13 paradas, with more than 500 people working directly in tourism activities at Salto del Limón, whose benefits reach up to 3,000 family members (this number may vary depending on the season).
- Quality control, with the support of national and international organizations the communities have received several training in the best ecotourism practices to provide a better service to visitors. The training has also included a management aspect: training to improve the business skills of tourism entrepreneurs and enabling processes to empower them to recognize themselves as businessmen and women and recognize the value of their work.
The coordination of diverse public and private organizations has been fundamental to improve environmental conditions and achieve a more organized tourism development in Salto del Limón.

As a result of the multiple stakeholder’s efforts, the entrepreneurial and ecotourism skills of the local communities have been improved, while at the same time a better tourism product has been established in the protected area, which also has positive results on the overall experience of tourists visiting Salto del Limón.

Lessons learned
While implementing the Good Practice what challenges were faced, and how were they overcome?

In a changing natural environment run by local communities with high tourist visitation levels, the challenges never end.

- One of the main and first lessons learned was regarding the importance of including all of the communities involved from the beginning in the development of any tourism destination. The lack of community inclusion led to poor mapping of the protected area. This has caused a major challenge, since one of the areas left was the Arroyo Chico River (the river source). Community members together with other stakeholders have worked to change agricultural activity into agroforestry (with the production of crops such as cacao, coffee, mango, avocado, etc) Demonstrating the importance of community participation and bringing together all the stakeholders to the table when making decisions of this magnitude.

- One of the challenges faced when the development of the Salto started was the lack of women participating and working in the attraction. Because many of the people who worked in the attraction at the start were the men who had been first farming the land, and the lack of an inclusive management strategy no women were working at el Salto. In order to address this issue, the organizations involved have taken gender inclusive measures to ensure everyone is included. Now out of the 250 direct workers, 150 of those are women. It should be noted that women, most of them housewives, were the creators of the most famous “Paradas”.

- The enticement of focusing only on the number of visitors (and the income more tourists generate) as the sole success factor, versus a more balanced approach and establishment of limits. Due to this the Salto del Limón has been facing the need to control the tourism affluence in the natural destination after it became a popular attraction to national and international tourism. Year after year the number of tourists who visited the area increased substantially going from 38,263 visitors in 2009; to more than 70,000 in 2018. At this point, the volume of the destination collapses, affecting not only the service quality but the natural resources available on the destination. Today, a control on the daily number of visitors has been established and is carefully watched to not overpass the tourism carrying capacity on the site.

As said above in this type of destination the challenges never end and the work to address them is ongoing. Two challenges that are currently being faced, but not yet overcome are:

- Even though the community has been involved and the benefits have mainly gone to them, the benefits of having such a successful destination have not trickled down to all. One of special concern has been that of progress in terms of education, which continues to see many children dropping out and low levels of literacy in the region. The destination is looking into addressing this by possibly establishing set percentages of income to be donated for the education systems in the community and working together with other stakeholders to address these issues.

- The dependency on the levels of the communities with regards to the tourism attraction and the effect and impacts on the community, and the whole province if the tourist attraction is lost. In 2018 and 2019 as a product of overpassing the carrying capacity, the settlement of people in the upper part of the natural monument, the
deforestation and the intense drought in the Dominican Republic, the water inflow of El Salto decreased to almost completely dry.

Results, achievements and recognitions

What were the qualitative and quantitative results of the good practice? Has it received any rewards?

Over the years, the community of El Limón has continued to learn the importance of this natural monument, and what it means for the families within the community. These families have been able to witness first-hand the well-being it produces to everyone involved. More than ever, locals understand that this natural monument is theirs to protect and nurture. They appreciate it as a special gift, a treasure, that not only represents their present livelihood, but if well cared for, it will also bring prosperity for generations to come. Living and preaching an environmentally responsible life has been one of the greatest unexpected gifts that this community has received. This is the legacy that the parents of El Limón will be passing on to their children.

Certification of 160 horse guides on:

- Working together with nature, and the importance of its protection.
- Customer service for cultural diversity
- Conflict management- managing emotions
- Identification with the tourism destination and brand based on a culture of service
- Building my personal brand (Salto del Limon Branding)
- Environmental and animal protection (protected areas)
- Teamwork from the perspective of the community (including from the Cluster)

Additional references