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MONARCH AND MAN IN MÉXICO: DEVELOPING ECO-TOURISM BUSINESSES IN THE CERRO PRIETO ÉJIDO OF MICHOACAN

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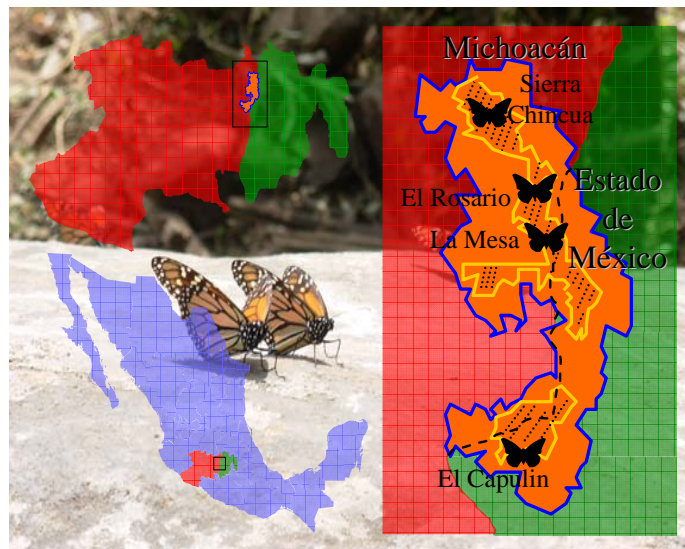
INTRODUCTION

The Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) is the best known of all migratory butterflies, traveling across North and South America, Europe, and even Oceania. Conservation of the famous Monarch began in 1976, when Dr. Fred Urquhart, through a system of tagging and releasing specimens, determined the Monarch's Mexican overwintering sites. In 2000, Mexico established a reserve called the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve, a 56,000 hectare protected area. Despite its protected status, conservation in this Reserve is complex because so many people live within the Reserve. There are 93 properties: 59 ejidos (community-owned lands), 13 indigenous communities and 21 small properties. In the most popular sanctuary as many as 4,000 tourists visit per day, putting enormous pressure on the Monarch's habitat. There is therefore a need to create alternative sources of employment and productive projects for these communities so that they will not deplete the Monarch's natural habitat.

This project focused on the Cerro Prieto ejido in the Sierra Chincua sanctuary. This ejido is the second most popular tourist site within the Reserve, but it is located within the "nuclear zone," which restricts infrastructure development and timber logging. While this limits human development and encroachment, it also presents additional challenges for the local community to find sustainable means of earning a living.

RESERVE AND SANCTUARY

The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve is located between Michoacán and México State (between 19° 59' 42" and 19° 18' 32" north latitude and 100° 09' 54" and 100° 06' 39" west longitude). Of the 56,259 hectares, 13,551 were decreed into the nuclear zone, which restricts development.



Location of the Sierra Chincua sanctuary. The blue line represents the border of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve and the yellow line delineates the nuclear zone.

The Sierra Chincua sanctuary is located in Cerro Prieto ejido, inside the Angangué Municipality, and was opened to the public in November 1996. People from this community have traditionally worked in the forestry sector, but since 1996 logging has been restricted (their forest is inside the "nuclear zone"). Without logging, locals have become highly dependent on butterfly tourism. This tourism is very seasonal and occurs during the Monarch's overwintering season, which is from November through April. Obviously, this short season presents a challenge to ejido members who are reliant on tourism for income. The ejido spans 300 hectares, of which 10 are occupied, forming the town located east of Michoacán State. The population in Cerro Prieto is around 500.

MARKET STUDY

An important part of this project was to identify the demographics and perceptions of tourists visiting the ejido. 290 visitors were surveyed between January 13 to 25, 2007 in the Sierra Chincua sanctuary. Data on income, age, trip origination, etc. was collected, and visitors were also asked what they perceived to be areas for improvement. Results were compared to Sierra Chincua's major competitor, El Rosario sanctuary. The survey provided data on which tourism services need improvement. Of the visitors surveyed, 241 were domestic and 49 were international tourists.

The surveys consisted of questions in the following categories:

- Personal Information
- Travel Characteristics
- Trip Planning
- Evaluation of Travel Experience
- Economic Demographics

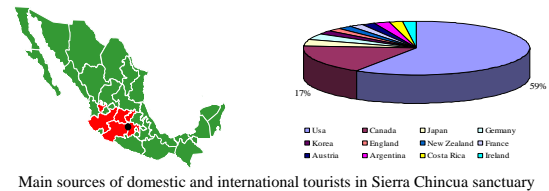


Surveys being conducted in the Sierra Chincua sanctuary. Ejido members assisted in conducting the surveys.

SURVEY RESULTS

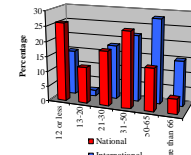
SOURCE OF TOURISTS

In total, surveys were answered by people from 12 countries. For domestic tourists, although people from 19 states were interviewed, the primary sources were Mexico City, Michoacán, Mexico State, Querétaro, Guanajuato and Jalisco, which together accounted for 87% of those interviewed. It appears that proximity to the Reserve is an important factor, as these states surround the Reserve. For international tourists, the primary sources are the United States and Canada, which accounted for 76% of international tourists.



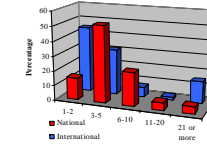
AGE

For the purposes of this study, it is useful to know which market segment tourist visitors belong to. Thus, the survey asked for the age of the tourist visitors. For those traveling in groups, only the group leader was polled to provide an estimate of the ages of the other members.



COMPOSITION OF TOUR GROUPS

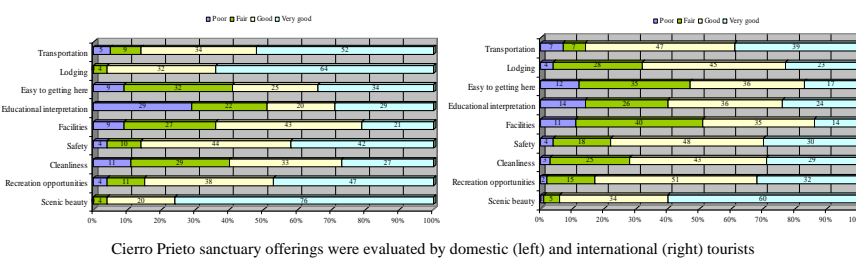
Domestically, most tourists traveled in groups of 3 to 5 people (52%) which is the typical Mexican family unit. In contrast, couples or singles dominated the international visitor groups, accounting for 45% of all those interviewed.



EVALUATING SIERRA CHINCUA SANCTUARY

Tourists were asked to evaluate the Sierra Chincua sanctuary on a range of items. 60% of domestic visitors rated scenic beauty as "very good," the highest possible rating. However, 14% of domestic tourists rated educational interpretation as "poor."

76% of international tourists also gave Sierra Chincua sanctuary the highest rating for its "scenic beauty," and again, 29% gave "educational interpretation" the worst possible rating of "poor." This shows that educational interpretation needs improvement in Sierra Chincua sanctuary.



The trails at Sierra Chincua sanctuary, local ejido members, and the closest town of Angangué.



The Sierra Chincua facilities: local restaurants, ticketing and admissions office, and viewpoint.



The concession area of Sierra Chincua sanctuary. Locals sell meals, handicrafts, and other items for tourists.

FINAL PRODUCTS

The information derived from the surveys provides a glimpse of areas needing further improvement within the Sierra Chincua sanctuary. Since budget, time and regulatory restrictions limit the scope of this project, it was decided to focus on priority areas that will produce the highest marginal benefits.

ECOTOURISM INTERPRETATION TRAINING

Ecotourism guides require communication and interpretation skills; basically they should be a link between visitors, the environment and the community. Thus, training is essential to guarantee local people can satisfy customer needs. A "crash course" in basic ecotourism was given to Sierra Chincua sanctuary guides. The training focused on the natural history of the Monarch butterfly and relevant customer service topics. In addition to the general outline of topics (below), the course took advantage of the guides' empirical knowledge. Most of the guides have been working at Sierra Chincua sanctuary for eleven years and have a broad vision of the sanctuary and its needs.

Topics covered:

- What is interpretation?
- Thematic interpretation
- Presenting a talk
- Parts of a talk
- Preparing and presenting a guided tour
- A dynamic tour
- Characteristics of a good guide
- Captive versus non-captive audience
- Building a thematic interpretation
- Qualities of a good talk
- Tips for better speaking
- Qualities of a good tour
- Tips on guiding a tour
- Customer service skills
- Basic English skills

TOURIST PAMPHLET

An inexpensive and easily reproducible (black and white) pamphlet was created and distributed to the Sierra Chincua sanctuary staff. The pamphlet provides information on the Monarch butterfly's natural history and basic information on the Reserve. The purpose of the pamphlet is to complement other interpretation and give an introduction to what tourists will encounter during their visit to the sanctuary.

FLIP BOOKS

A set of nine laminated cards were developed to help Sierra Chincua sanctuary guides on their tours. The cards are in Spanish and English and are illustrated with maps and photos.

The 12.5 X 19 cm flip cards include content on:

- Introduction to the guide and trail conditions
- Services provided and orientation
- Life cycle of the Monarch butterfly
- Monarch migration
- Reserve history
- Sierra Chincua sanctuary information
- General facts about Monarchs
- Frequently asked questions
- How to help the Monarch butterfly

CONCLUSION

The Cerro Prieto ejido has seen many big Monarch projects come and go through their territory but few have seen tangible benefits. This project focused on simple training and tourism materials that can be easily used by Cerro Prieto members in their daily work of providing guide services to tourists. Thus with a small investment in money and skills transfer, the project has helped locals to solve some everyday problems.



Guides using flip books during their tours, which are on foot and horseback, in Sierra Chincua sanctuary.

