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Oaxaca Food Sovereignty Tour participants in an organic amaranth field, 2014

Food Sovereignty Tours: Can “alternative tourism” contribute to food sovereignty?

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Introduction: The beginnings of Food Sovereignty Tours

When Food First founded its educational travel program Food Sovereignty Tours in 2010, it had already organized dozens of trips to destinations like Cuba and Kerala, India—places that had carried out radical reforms to greatly improve literacy rates, access to healthcare and other socio-economic indicators. While the Cold War mentality of the 1980s and neoliberal triumphalism of the 1990s sought to convince us that there was “no alternative” to corporate-led globalization, Food First’s many publications showed how this model was failing most of humanity... and its delegations brought participants to the frontlines of people’s struggles for democratic, locally-controlled alternatives.

By 2010, on the heels of a global food, financial and climate crisis—and in the midst of a burgeoning US food movement—the time was ripe for Food First to create a formal institutional space for its educational delegations. Global Exchange—founded by former Food First staffers Kevin Danaher and Medea Benjamin in 1986—helped incubate our program, modeled on the highly acclaimed program [Reality Tours](#). Thus, Food Sovereignty Tours was born: an educational program focused on helping activists, researchers and concerned citizens to understand an increasingly complex global food system and engage in informed activism upon their return home, while also magnifying the voices of those struggling to carve out alternative, people-centered food systems around the world.

As a program led by researchers and activists, Food Sovereignty Tours quickly began grappling with the many implications—ethical, political, ecological, etc.—of coordinating international (and local) travel experiences, and the ways in which this work invariably intersected with various facets

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of the “tourism industry.” This Backgrounder identifies some of the main currents of international tourism and the tensions inherent in this work as part of an ongoing process of critical self-reflection on the following questions: Can educational, justice-focused travel truly be used as a tool to build social movements? And can it avoid reproducing the injustices generated by both conventional and alternative forms of tourism?

Tourism: Capitalism’s Handmaiden?

As the largest export earner in the world, tourism is undeniably “one of the most important forces shaping our world” (Higgins-Desbiolles 2006: 1192). As a global industry, it is the sector experiencing the most vigorous economic growth, encompassing 904 million tourists who spent \$855 billion USD in 2007, according to the World Tourism Organization (Gyr 2010). Higgins-Desbiolles and Blanchard (2008) identify the foundations of modern tourism in the early 20th century with the establishment of paid leave for workers and “socialist education” used to foster solidarity among communist countries, which eventually gave way to tourism as a means of advancing capitalism in the post-war “development” decades and then in the neoliberal era. The free trade agreements and deregulation policies imposed on the global South in the 1980s and 90s facilitated the expansion of capital accumulation across borders and eroded the ability of nations to protect their domestic economies from the ravages of global capitalism, including the negative effects of tourism. At the same time, International Financial Institutions like the World Bank continued to heavily promote tourism as a means of generating foreign exchange—in turn facilitating the repayment of onerous foreign debts.

In this largely unregulated

“free market” environment, the benefits from global tourism concentrated largely in the global North, perpetuating neocolonial forms of global inequality “with the multinational companies of the advanced capitalist countries retaining the economic power and resources to invest in and ultimately control nations of the developing world” (Wearing, quoted in Higgins-Desbiolles 2006: 1195). Moreover, tourism has transformed landscapes and social relations in destination countries—for example, creating elite tourist enclaves, from which local populations are segregated, except as a source of cheap labor. A growing body of literature links the expansion of corporate tourism—including so-called alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism (see below)—to the recent wave of global “land grabs,” dispossessing peasants and indigenous peoples from their territories (Gardner 2012; Kerksen 2013).

What’s “Alternative” about Alternative Tourism?

As a response to the many social and environmental criticisms of mass tourism, a number of “alternative” forms began emerging in the 1960s and 70s, such as pro-poor tourism, ecotourism, volunteer tourism, cultural tourism, sustainable tourism and community-based tourism. There is much debate, however, regarding the extent to which these alternatives embodied a genuine paradigm shift or merely palliative reforms meant to appease critics and sustain capital accumulation in the tourism sector. Blackstock (2005), for instance, observes that much of the literature on community-based tourism (CBT) is focused, not on ways tourism can be used to foster community empowerment, but rather on CBT as a strategy for sustaining the industry itself. Most proponents of CBT, she argues, “do not challenge or question the

development of a tourism industry, but seek to make tourism more acceptable to the local residents” (41).

Indeed, many forms of alternative tourism fall short of advocating radical structural change—either within the tourism industry itself or in the broader socio-economic systems in which it is embedded. Nonetheless, it is worth describing a few trends in alternative tourism here—ecotourism, agritourism and justice tourism—which provide important context and lessons for Food Sovereignty Tours’ evolving model and philosophy. Of the three, ecotourism is the best known with the longest history, and has also drawn the sharpest criticism.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism represents the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, with an estimated growth rate of 10-15 percent per year (Scheyvens 1999). The World Conservation Union (IUCN) defines ecotourism as “environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations” (Ceballos-Lascurain, quoted in Higgins-Desbiolles 2008: 63). However, ecotourism has been criticized as a marketing ploy and a “Trojan horse” that opens the doors for the disruption of indigenous cultures and the degradation of the “pristine” landscapes targeted by ecotourism (Butcher 2007). It has also been criticized for allowing environmental concerns to take precedence over those of host communities and usurping local ownership and control (Scheyvens 2002).

At its best, ecotourism can educate both tourists and hosts about

environmental issues and build environmental awareness, becoming a potential “catalyst to profound changes in human–environmental interaction” (Higgins-Desbiolles 2008: 63). At its worst, “the conservation of (estheticized) nature for tourism purposes is used to advance a project of corporate control” (Kerssen 2013: 74). Ironically, ecotourism—and tourism in general—can destroy the very features that attract tourists in the first place. But it is the lack of community consultation and participation that has undoubtedly been ecotourism’s greatest weakness, and one that must be overcome in order to avoid engaging in a kind of tourism that responds primarily to the desires of travelers at the expense of the communities that they visit.

Agritourism

Agritourism emerged in response both to the negative impacts of corporate mass tourism and to the rural crisis affecting small farmers and rural communities worldwide. The spread of industrial agriculture and imposition of free trade agreements favoring large exporters have had a devastating impact on family farms producing food for local and regional markets. The result has been an emptying out of the countryside, as rural people seek wage labor in cities and across borders. Agritourism emerged as one option for farmers to generate an income while remaining on the land, helping to stem the tide of out-migration.

While agritourism has been embraced in some places—especially Western Europe—many farmers and analysts alike remain skeptical. In a case study in France, for instance, farmers refused to diversify into tourism, which they viewed as a departure from their agricultural profession and a loss of their social identity (Brandth and Haugen 2011). Indeed, engaging in agritourism may entail a shifting

of priorities for the household or community, away from a focus on agriculture to catering to the needs of tourists (Ibid.).

Agritourism is still a relatively small sector of alternative tourism and its economic viability remains in question—especially in the absence of state support for diversified peasant agriculture and protection from threats such as land grabbing, water contamination from extractive industries, and meager prices for peasant-produced crops. Food Sovereignty Tours to Bolivia regularly visit a farming and fishing community on the shores of Lake Titicaca where families formed a community agritourism association in 2007. While providing supplementary income for those households—and part-time employment for 1-2 young people as local guides—it is clear that this has not stopped, much less reversed, outmigration. Tour participants interact primarily with older family members, whose adult children live in the city or abroad. From a political and educational perspective, however, this experience allows tour participants to see firsthand the impacts of trade and development policies—often influenced by their own countries’ governments—on the social fabric of rural Bolivia.

Agritourism in and of itself is unlikely to revitalize rural areas without structural changes that address these wider systemic problems. Nonetheless, this varies widely from region to region. In the Basque Country, for instance, Food Sovereignty Tours stay exclusively in rural bed and breakfasts owned by members of the farmers’ union, EHNE Bizkaia, who benefit from the supplementary income to support their primarily agriculture-based operations. Agritourism may also contribute to a foundation for change by: educating urban people about the realities of farming; creating

rural-urban alliances; providing an incentive to maintain traditional farming and food production practices; conserving natural resources and agrobiodiversity; and revaluing rural culture in general.

Justice Tourism

While various alternative tourism labels—perhaps most notably, ecotourism—have been co-opted by the corporate tourism industry, “justice tourism” has emerged as an alternative rooted in anti-capitalist globalization movements, with an eye towards systemic change. Higgins-Desbiolles (2008) argues justice tourism “stands out starkly” from the list of alternative tourism types, “in its unwavering commitment to overturning inequitable tourism and capitalist globalization” (63). According to Scheyvens (2011), justice tourism has the following attributes:

- Builds solidarity between visitors and those visited
- Promotes mutual understanding and relationships built on equality, sharing and respect
- Supports self-sufficiency and self-determination of local communities [and]
- Maximizes local economic, cultural and social benefits. (105)

Justice tourism can also involve visiting marginalized areas traditionally ignored by tour operators, thus allowing historically oppressed communities to share their perspectives—which are often erased or denigrated in official discourse and mainstream media. To be sure, such endeavors can veer dangerously towards voyeurism and the “commodification” of poverty—depending (mostly) on the tour operator’s approach (Ibid.).

Justice tourism may also provide opportunities for participants to gain a better understanding of

the foreign policy implications of their own governments. For Food Sovereignty Tours participants, the opportunity to witness firsthand the consequences of North American aid and trade policies—for example, NAFTA's impact on rural Mexico and the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement's impact on Korean farmers—can be deeply transformative.

Food Sovereignty Tours: Another food system is possible

Food Sovereignty Tours draws from the perspectives of alter-globalization theory, holding that alternative globalizations are not only possible, but necessary as a means of building movements capable of resisting—and building alternatives to—capitalist globalization. In other words, as the slogan of the World Social Forum goes, we believe that “another world is possible.” Drawing primarily from justice tourism—and seeking to contribute to the development and analysis of justice tourism as an incipient field—Food Sovereignty Tours seeks to help participants understand the realities of our global capitalist food system and promote informed activism for food justice and food sovereignty.

One of the key tensions inherent in our work—and tourism in general—is its exclusionary nature. In other words, travel is a privilege. Above all else, notes Scheyvens (2011) true justice tourism must not be about the Western traveler's right to explore exotic places and people, but about the rights of the people in the destination country. It is also essential to explore head on what role middle and upper class people with the financial means to fund their own travel have in social movements led by the poor—as well as how opportunities

for travel can be extended to people from marginalized communities, from both the North and the South. As Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) argue, alliances between radical and progressive groups are crucial to social change. We see Food Sovereignty Tours as a tool for forging those alliances.

In practice, creating a space where we must manage the expectations and desires of paying participants while at the same time prioritizing our political partnerships has been a challenge. Crafting itineraries based on educational objectives and priorities of local political partners often means sacrificing comfort, bypassing popular tourist attractions, or traveling off the beaten path where infrastructure, services and even food (or good food) is lacking. For participants, this requires a tremendous amount of trust, patience and flexibility—based in the knowledge that this is not conventional tourism. We believe that this work is about sustaining an evolving, collective, cross-class and international conversation about what allyship and engagement with the global movement for food sovereignty looks like.

We are also committed to making Food Sovereignty Tours available to people from marginalized communities, who don't often have the opportunity to engage in the sort of international exchanges that we try to facilitate. To do this we have established a scholarship fund to support the participation especially



Bolivia tour participants with CONAMAQ indigenous movement, 2013

of young farmers, activists, people of color and low-income communities. The fundraising for this effort can be slow and challenging. However, we view this as a critical to using tourism as a force of radical change and movement building, instead of an elite, commercial venture.

In its effort to emphasize and strengthen social movements as the main force for transformative change, Food Sovereignty Tours seeks to make cross-cultural, cross-class and cross-border alliances in order to create what Evans (2008) calls “counter-hegemonic globalization”—a global project of transformation aimed at “replacing the dominant global regime with one that maximizes democratic political control and makes the equitable development of human capabilities and environmental stewardship its priorities” (272). This project is, of course, not immune to the power imbalances, historical oppressions, and forces of cooptation that have plagued tourism, both conventional and alternative. Nonetheless, as we continue critically examining our work and developing methodologies to evaluate its effectiveness, we remain hopeful that tourism need not serve corporate interests, but that indeed, another tourism—and another food system—is possible.

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Cuban farmer Wilfredo with tour participants discussing organic pest control, 2014