Reverse Osmosis: Cultural Sensitivity Training in the Costa Rican Luxury Ecolodge Setting

Agnes Nowaczek, Niagara College, Canada

Chapter Summary

This case study portrays a real situation and account of staff training designed to improve staff morale and bridge their intercultural understanding of international visitors, encountered during a 2-month fieldwork at Latitude 10 Exclusive Beach Resort, Costa Rica, in the fall of 2011. The training approach employed by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality described in this case takes the reader through steps designed to reach common understanding, first among the employees and management of Latitude 10, and then between staff and visitors. Andrea Bonilla who is the co-owner and VP Operations of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, visits Latitude 10 with the mission to improve quality of service and staff morale. She facilitates several hands-on experiential workshops and staff team-building exercises over several days of her visit. The emphasis of each exercise is on understanding each person on the team, improving team communication, and understanding the perspective of visitors. Throughout this process, it becomes very clear that management needs to focus on strengthening the team, and only then the collective can reach the goal of exceptional service. Within the mission of strengthening the team lies complex socio-cultural dynamics between local and city employees, those between staff and management, and finally between the staff and international visitors. In addition to the cultural clash of tourist expectations and performance by local staff, the case also connects other intertwined issues of poor employment opportunities in the remote beach destination of Santa Teresa, the question of social and economic sustainability that the management must face, and the continuous relationship-building between tourists and local staff to facilitate meaningful and enriching travel experience.

Learning Objectives:

After discussing the case, students will be able to:

1. **Apply** the following programming theories: Symbolic Interactionism, Social Exchange Theory, Personality, to the socio-cultural issues presented in the case (see Fennell, 2002).
2. **Explain** the above-mentioned theories from three perspectives: the local employee, the visitor, and the management (Latitude 10 and Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality).
3. **Analyse (compare and contrast)** the socio-cultural aspects of the case from the psychological & social empowerment/disenpowerment perspectives of the local employees. (See Scheyvens, 1999)
4. **Demonstrate** how as a manager of Latitude 10 and Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality you would solve the socio-cultural differences between visitors and local employees presented in the case. **Develop** solutions for local employees, visitors, and the management. (See Appendix 1)
5. Use the Typology of Tourists and Influence Upon the Community (Font, 1995; adapted from Smith, 1990) to **evaluate** the managerial actions which would ensure socio-cultural sustainability. (See Appendix 2)
The Issue, Opportunity or Trend
Luxury Ecotourism Travel in Costa Rica: The Question of Intercultural Understanding

The issue of intercultural understanding, particularly between individualist and collectivist cultures, has been identified as increasingly important in the context of global tourism. The idea of training employees in the global village where managers are dealing with multitude of cultural, social, and personal factors—both demographic and psychographic—presents endless and dynamic challenges (Sharma, et al., 2009; Kielbasiewicz-Drozdowska & Radko, 2006; Landis et al., 2004). The good news, as exemplified in the Handbook of Intercultural Training (Landis et al., 2004), is that modern HR training in tourism is focused on cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes in employees across variety of other demographic and psychographic characteristics. Mutual relationship building between culture, tourism, and communication process depends on the awareness of respectful attitudes toward “otherness”, or in other words on the acceptance of “cultural relativism” (Kielbasiewicz-Drozdowska & Radko, 2006). The increasing interaction between cultures in tourism brought needed focus to host cultures rather than the customers’ perspective which is mostly grounded in individualist cultures (Landis et al., 2004; Sharma et al., 2009). Consequently, there are direct managerial implications pertaining the intercultural service encounters and the needed intercultural competence among local employees, which influences perceived service levels and satisfaction among employees and customers (Sharma et al., 2009). These were the very issues approached by the management team at Latitude 10.

Sylvia, the General Manager of Latitude 10 Exclusive Beach Resort, was getting ready for the big day. The humid Pacific air stirred with talks of Andrea Bonilla, the co-owner and VP Operations of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, who was visiting Latitude 10 for several days. Looking in the mirror, Sylvia knew she was shouldering the responsibility for the overall performance of the small eco-resort. Her youthfulness and small stature staring back at her from the mirror did not help in giving her the needed authority. During her internship with Cayuga, she was at the top of her class and keen on trying a management role that was far removed from the noise and business of San Jose.

At Latitude 10, Sylvia was successful in creating a good team, despite the perceived differences between staff from the “big” city and the local staff from the remote beach town of Santa Teresa (see Figure 1). She learned quickly how to speak with local staff members so that she would not offend them, and in particular how to interact with local male employees who were much older and more experienced than herself. She had yet to make strides in bridging the employees’ understanding of international tourists with service quality demands placed on her by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, Sylvia’s ‘boss’. Still, her accomplishments were far from her mind as she was anxiously planning the morning and preparing her staff. Sylvia was aware of certain shortcomings pertaining to guest expectations and quality of service in the demanding luxury category. She knew that staff performance and morale needed to be significantly improved, despite the ongoing issue of seasonal employment which came along with the destination.

Sylvia understood that over the next few days all her efforts thus far would be scrutinised and evaluated by Andrea. How will she make her staff see from the guests’ perspective which is inherently tied to their seemingly high expectations? How will she bridge the gap of cultural norms between the punctual and detail-oriented
tourist and the easy-going laid-back ‘Tico’? How will she further unify the team; those from San Jose and locally from Santa Teresa, the new interns and others who have worked at Latitude 10 for several years, the young singles with no experience and no local ties and those older with families and dependants who have years of experience under their belt? How will she apply her management style to reach the business objectives and yet have her entire team on board and engaged? Most of all, how will she address what is entirely outside of her control; the seasonality of work in Santa Teresa being largely responsible for the never-ending training of staff?

Figure 1. Silvia (fourth from the left) and some of the staff at Latitude 10 with trash collected from the beach.

Photo by Agnes Nowaczek, 2011

The Innovation
Case Context: Ecotourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is THE destination for nature lovers! The small beautiful country boasts some of the best wilderness experiences and wildlife spectacles in the air, on land, and in water. Visitors can preview these experiences on video and plan their trip according to the Greatest Wildlife Spectacle Calendar available on the official Costa Rican Tourism web site (visitcostarica.com, 2017a).

Costa Rica has been promoted by the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT) as an ecotourism destination (visitcostarica.com, 2017b). The national focus on ecotourism can be seen across all sectors of tourism and is wholeheartedly embraced by large and small operators, alike. CANAECO, the National Chamber of Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism of Costa Rica, demonstrates Costa Rica’s commitment to sustainable tourism, and ecotourism in particular. The organization’s focus is on using the low impact tourism model in the country’s socio-economic development strategy, and by doing so, making the protection of Costa Rica’s natural and cultural heritage top priority (CANAECO, 2017). In fact, Costa Rica continues to emerge as the world leader in sustainability and ecotourism, for example: deriving 99% of energy from renewable sources, developing zero-
emission coffee companies, incorporating the right to a healthy environment in its Constitution, and operating carbon-neutral airlines (Rubio, 2018).

Because ecotourism is so well established in Costa Rica and due to the country’s well developed infrastructure, international visitors in the higher income bracket tend to come equipped with high expectations of both the experience and service delivery. The tourist market is unique in Costa Rica, attracting responsible and ethical travellers. Authenticity of wilderness experience and responsible behaviour of visitors is ensured by several national programs: Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST, 2017), Blue Flag Ecological Program (beaches category) (PBAE, 2017), Payments for Ecosystem Services (IIED, 2017), and National Forest Financing Fund (FONAFIFO, 2017). Currently, there are 150 beaches in Costa Rica which proudly display the blue flag, indicating they have met at least minimum standards of the Blue Flag Ecological Program (Arias, 2017). Among the cleanest beaches is the town of Santa Teresa in the Puntarenas province. See interactive map at the bottom of the article for complete list of beaches with blue flags (Arias, 2017).

Sustainable Tourism Practiced by Latitude 10

Key sustainability projects at Latitude 10 equally embrace the socio-cultural, ecological, and economic aspects, all of which are inherently interrelated. Addressing the socio-cultural component of sustainability, guests to the eco-resort are provided with a sense of place connecting them with the local culture and people, such as through their participation in various local projects. For example, travellers are invited to support the program “Building for the Future”, in partnership with the Earth Equilibrium NGO, which provides key supplies and computer access to students in local schools surrounding the eco-resort (latitude10.resort.com, 2017b). Opportunities presented by such travel philanthropy projects allow guests an insight into the local life, their contribution to education, and authentic space for conversation with local staff. Equally important is the issue of intercultural sensitivity training among the local staff, many of whom do not travel extensively and do not have personal exposure to other cultures that may be very different from their own. Facilitating intercultural understanding between the hosts and guests provides the necessary environment for positive interaction, perception, and mutual respect. Consequently, focusing on the people (both hosts and guests) will ensure long-term success of the business and its bottom line, as well as its contribution to the local economy.

On the account of local economy, Latitude 10 management—and Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality in general—are committed to hiring locally and helping the community by offering year-round positions and cross-training to avoid seasonal layoffs (Gardner, 2017; 2018). Across the 9 properties in their management Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality hires over 400 local staff, and each property hires 80-100% from the local community (Gardner, 2017). The commitment of Latitude 10 is aimed at residents of Santa Teresa and nearby area due to limited employment opportunities, especially during the low season. In some cases, local staff get access to English lessons taught by a temporary volunteer, but in general many do not speak English and are still given priority of employment (latitude10.resort.com, 2017b). Another example of supporting local economy via the multiplier effect is by purchasing and advertising local products to visitors. Some examples include promotion of authentic art from local artists, local services (e.g., massage, horse riding, surfing lessons), and locally made organic soaps and shampoos which became very popular among guests after using these at the eco-resort.

Finally, under the management of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, Latitude 10 also fulfills the ecological component of sustainability. Because the eco-resort is located near the beachfront where the rainforest meets the Pacific Ocean, maintaining minimal impact on these environments and educating travelers is very
important. As regular practice, management and staff support the commitment to ecological integrity which includes beach cleaning around the property, and variety of water conservation efforts such as installing low flow toilets and using waste water treatment system. The casitas allow constant cross-ventilation, creatively replacing the need for air conditioning, and the water is heated by solar panels. In the kitchen, staff do not serve any endangered species of seafood, and effort is made on serving locally produced organic fruits and vegetables, organic coffee, and biodynamic wine (latitude10.resort.com, 2017b). And if you want to sip your drink with a straw, you will have one made of bamboo!

Stakeholders Involved
Company Background: The Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality Approach and Latitude 10

The Cayuga Collection consists of seven eco-lodges and boutique hotels in Costa Rica, one in Nicaragua, and one in Panama. They are scattered along the Pacific coast from Osa Peninsula in the South to Guanacaste in the North, across the Costa Rican border in Granada, Nicaragua, and across the Southern border with Panama in David (see Figure 2). The properties are managed by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality which is co-owned by Hans Pfister, President and Andrea Bonilla, VP Operations, both graduates of the Cornell University Hotel School in Ithaca, New York (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Properties managed by Cayuga Sustainable Management.
Our hotels & lodges are dotted along Central America’s Pacific Coast – from Panama through Costa Rica’s wild Osa Peninsula, up to Guanacaste in the North and on to Nicaragua.

You’ll get to see more of the Pacific Coast by designing the perfect combination of retreats that’s totally you. We’ll show you how.

Source: https://www.cayugacollection.com/#main

Figure 3. Andrea Bonilla and Hans Pfister, owners of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality.

Source: https://www.cayugacollection.com/who-we-are/
The main focus of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality is on maintaining high standards of sustainability via management and operations of the properties which are in the “eco-luxury” category. In fact, Cayuga claims to “redefine the symbiosis of luxury and sustainability” in a new way that is more holistic (Cayuga, 2017a). To Cayuga, the guilt-free luxury lodging means replacing air conditioners with fans and natural breeze, disposable shampoo and soap with refillable organic and biodegradable products made locally from natural ingredients, energy-intensive Jacuzzis with cool showers in private outdoors bathrooms (Cayuga, 2017a), or simply saying ‘no’ to unsustainable requests from tourists, like serving bottled water or endangered tuna (Elliott, 2012).

Cayuga’s focus is on authentic experience and unique natural and cultural attractions offered by the destination where guests can connect with nature, learn about the Costa Rican culture, relax and revitalize in tropical settings very different from their own. Each of the nine properties managed by Cayuga has a variety of sustainable projects that give back to their communities and are relevant to their immediate local context. From the perspective of economic sustainability, the Cayuga Collection generates about $15 million (US) and employs over 400 local residents (Cayuga, 2017b). Additionally, the management company maintains overarching projects pertaining to larger issues such as sustainable seafood, water and waste reduction.

**Latitude 10 Exclusive Beach Resort** is among the properties managed by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality. The resort is located on the Nicoya Peninsula of the Pacific coast of Costa Rica in the remote beach town of Santa Teresa (see Figure 2). It is part of the Cayuga Collection after originally being designed as a summer residence by two friends. The remote location of this small beach resort offers unparalleled visitor experience of luxury and solitude amidst the vibrant tropical rainforest and the lulling sound of the ocean visible from most of the resort. Because the resort is so small and remote, it offers the best in relaxation, romance, surfing, and wildlife, depending on the visitor’s interest. The destination of Santa Teresa boasts some of the best surfing spots in the country with ideal conditions throughout the year, long stretches of pristine and unexplored beaches (see Figure 4), diverse wildlife where the rainforest meets the ocean. As well, on offer are a variety of local flavours in numerous Tico restaurants, and activities ranging from horse riding along the beach to visiting swimming holes or local schools.

Visitors can choose from five open-air private casitas or one guestroom, which are surrounded by wildlife just steps from the beach (see Figure 5). The rates range from $290 to $550 per night during the green season, and $580 to $1,100 per night during the holiday season (latitude10.resort.com, 2017a). Each casita has different local décor, an outdoor shower with locally-made organic soap and shampoo, is completely private and hidden by the lush foliage, and offers the guests unparalleled relaxation experience involving all senses (see Figure 7). Guests have full use of the resort’s salt water pool overlooking the ocean, clubhouse with cocktail bar and variety of spaces to relax under the roof and outside amidst the tropical vegetation (see Figure 6), access to lookout space where guests can request dining or spa services, and rental of bicycles to explore the surrounding area (see Figure 8).
The open air design allows for the breeze and nature sounds to pass through each casita while having the wildlife closer for visitors’ enjoyment. Resident howler monkeys, sloths, magpie-jays, lineated woodpeckers, iguanas, geckos, and Halloween crabs are frequent visitors to the amazement of tourists. Only steps away, the beach is full of more amazing creatures, both on the sands where the forest meets the ocean, and in and above the waves. The beach is visited by Leatherback and Olive Ridley sea turtles during the egg laying season, and it is frequented by sandpipers, plovers and herons. From above, pelicans are often seen flying in V formation and diving into the waves for fish, while the swimming holes are teeming with beautiful creatures from fish and octopus to small decorative sea slugs. Some nights, visitors can see the bioluminescence of plankton near the shore when disturbed by the waves.

Source: https://www.latitude10resort.com/resort-gallery-santa-teresa/
Figure 5. Premium junior suite in one of the open-air casitas.

Source: https://www.latitude10resort.com/resort-gallery-santa-teresa/

Figure 6. The clubhouse with cocktail bar, dining and sitting areas overlooking the pool, and lookout space.

Source: https://www.latitude10resort.com/resort-gallery-santa-teresa/
Figure 7. Locally-made soaps and shampoos, local dish prepared by the chef, and resident howler monkeys. 

Source: https://www.latitude10resort.com/resort-gallery-santa-teresa/

Figure 8. Outdoor shower in one of the casitas, and complementary bicycles for guests.

Source: https://www.latitude10resort.com/resort-gallery-santa-teresa/
Approach Used and the Impact

Received Awards

Pfister and Bonilla believe in walking the talk, and this is reflected by numerous awards received by Cayuga over the last few years. Among them is the latest National Geographic World Legacy Award 2017 in the Earth Changers category, in recognition of the “cutting-edge leadership in environmentally friendly business practices and green technology” (National Geographic, 2017). (See Figure 9). Ingenious and efficient sustainable technologies and practices are evident in Cayuga’s mission and are found in every managed property, for example, using only recycled water for garden irrigation, producing biogas to replace propane, heating water with solar panels, replacing plastic water bottles and straws with reusable glass bottles and recyclable bamboo straws, aiding scientific research with Osa Conservation, providing environmental education to children from areas surrounding the hotels via their Earth Equilibrium NGO, and the latest ‘Dock to Dish’ pilot program to partner local fishermen with chefs (National Geographic, 2017).

Figure 9. Winners of the National Geographic World Legacy Award 2017.

In the year prior, Cayuga received the Green Hotelier Award 2016 recognizing properties which have made “the biggest commitments to sustainability with innovative programs that positively impact their people, their community and the planet” (Green Hotelier, 2016). The judging committee pointed to several initiatives implemented by Cayuga, such as the properties’ black water treatment system, innovative approaches to reduce energy consumption, use of renewable energy and water reduction programs, guest education, hotels’ packaging made of organic fibers, Cayuga’s work with Pack for a Purpose organization, support of local healthcare, and strong employee care program with staff advancement examples (Green Hotelier, 2016). Similar recognition from other organizations include the Conde Nast Traveler’s Conde Nast World Saver Award
Cultural Sensitivity Training at Latitude 10: The Current Dilemma

Due to the exclusive nature of Latitude 10 and the key aim of sustainability, the focus is always on top quality service. The interpretation of “quality service,” however, tends to be contentious, especially when cultures, lifestyles and expectations clash in effort to deliver it. The “Tico” (Costa Rican) lifestyle of “pura vida,” which means pure life, truly encompasses the local philosophy of enjoying life to the fullest and taking it slow. Many Costa Rican staff reinstate their satisfaction with the easy-going lifestyle, being close to family and friends, and living in a beautiful country which they clearly love and are proud of. Place in this context the ever-so-rushed and time-sensitive North American or European visitor spending US $580 to $1,100 per night during the busy season (latitude10.resort.com, 2017a), and you are sure to have conflict.

Not surprisingly, the socio-cultural differences between the western countries and Costa Rican traditions play an important role in the host-visitor interactions. These conflicts present ongoing challenges for managers, and in this case for Sylvia. Additionally, Sylvia has been facing financial and logistical challenges with local employment. High staff turnover is common in Santa Teresa due to seasonality of employment in the area. Consequently, there is a lack of permanent, long-term solutions which would help contribute to employee morale and maintain high quality of service. Much of Sylvia’s time has been spent on training new staff and improving communication within the team. She was continually thinking about her staff and visitors, but also about the expectations placed on her by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality.

Assigned the responsibility of bridging the socio-cultural gap between local employees and international visitors—thus improving staff morale and quality of service—Andrea Bonilla, the co-owner and VP Operations of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, visited Latitude 10 with a bag full of tricks. Over the next few days, she would implement a series of practical staff training workshops and experiential exercises aiming at developing intercultural competence among the staff. These practical exercises were holistically focused on cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes that would further lead to higher satisfaction and quality of service (Landis et al., 2004). The genius of these exercises was grounded in interpersonal communication, including subtler forms of body language and facial expressions which was invaluable for communicating with tourists without the actual language.

Even before stepping into the resort, Andrea called everyone to meet her outside. Without any icebreakers or introductions, all staff and management rushed to the front gate and congregated on the narrow dirt road in front of the eco-resort. They didn’t know at the time, but this first experience was designed to present staff with the perspective of the visitors as they arrive to Latitude 10.

The first question posed by Andrea seemed to sink in, “What is the first thing that you notice? Look around. Imagine taking a plane from a major city, being picked up at the airport and then driving down this dirt road surrounded by the dense rainforest with new sights and sounds you don’t have in a big city.” Still silence.

Another question, “Where do you see the name of the eco-resort?” Point taken! The small sign was completely obscured by vegetation, as was most of the entrance gate. (See Figure 10).
“Let’s go inside and pretend I am a tourist.”

Once again, everyone returned back into the resort and waited patiently. Finally, after what seemed like a long time, the bell rang in the office. The staff member replied to the call, while simultaneously Sylvia rushed to greet the visitor and the kitchen staff prepared a welcome drink. By the time Sylvia reached the front gate, the van was parked inside and the ‘tourist’ played by Andrea was standing outside and waiting.

More feedback. “Look around. By the time you came to help with my suitcase and offer me a drink, I have been standing here at the back what seems like laundry and work area. The sights, sounds and smells are not what we want our visitors to experience. Also, I waited too long. Someone should open the gate right away and greet me, then take me to meet the manager. While I wait, I’m confused about where I should go. No one spoke to me yet. My entire experience should be LUXURIOUS and RELAXING. What can we do differently?”

This time Sylvia presented several ideas. “We need to change how we do things. We need a more efficient system from the visitor’s perspective.”

“Exactly!” Andrea was clearly pleased and quickly snapped out of her international tourist persona. Shortly after followed greetings with all staff and conversations around the logistics of her stay. Later in the evening, after more conversations with management of the resort, Andrea was working in the office and preparing for the next few days.
The next morning, right after an early breakfast, Andrea and Sylvia were waiting for the staff with big smiles on their faces. Andrea had a big hockey bag laying next to her on the floor and asked everyone to stand in a circle. Immediately everyone was neatly arranged in a big circle and glancing with anticipation at the big bag.

Andrea took out a rubber ball from the bag and addressed one of the staff, “Excuse me, Danielle, would you mind passing this ball to Sylvia, please?” After getting her reply, the first ball would leave Andrea’s hands, then after a pause another ball would be in motion, and so on. Each person would say something similar and polite, then wait for reply, and focus on the next rubber ball.

“This is what happens when you get busy and have to speed things up significantly.” This time Andrea tossed the first ball in the same order but without a warning. The staff member missed it and ran off to fetch it, while there were more balls already in the air and on the floor. Other staff were yelling one or two words without any pleasantries. The entire scene was stressful, loud and chaotic.

“This is what happens when you get busy. Without systems in place you lose focus, you make mistakes, you don’t communicate with each other, and the overall quality of service goes down tremendously. Let’s sit down and talk about it. How did you feel during the first round versus the second?”

Andrea’s applied learning exercise worked beautifully. Comments, observations and ideas started pouring out from the staff. Everyone understood there is no time for pleasantries during such busy time, and some staff members would compare similar examples in the past when they took things personally, how they felt, and how it affected their level of service. Everything seemed interrelated. Staff members would start proposing solutions as they saw the related issues. Both Sylvia and Andrea seemed very pleased.

This was the climate of the following few days during Andrea’s stay with multitude of similar exercises and workshops designed to make the team more cohesive and efficient. The holistic nature of these exercises was especially relevant in developing intercultural competence among employees from collectivist culture with the aim of providing service to tourists coming from individualist cultures (Landis et al., 2004). After only two days, the morale among employees was significantly improved and all lines of communication were open. You could see and feel the difference. As the co-owner and VP Operations of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, Andrea’s work was nearly done. Now Sylvia must continue the work and consider several managerial questions and decision outcomes to implement the changes immediately and with long-lasting results. How can she maintain the quality of service after only a few days of workshops? To make this a lasting change, how can she further empower local staff? How can the management facilitate better opportunities for tourist-staff interactions?

**Implications & Lessons Learned**

**Decision Outcomes (Proposed Solutions)**

The intercultural sensitivity training implemented at Latitude 10 over the span of one week started generating impact almost immediately within the team. Over the following weeks and months, the management team continued incorporating the lessons learned into company practices via seamless processes, such as employee training with the added focus on intercultural competence. Broader community issues brought about by the local staff were addressed by inviting tourists to participate in various projects. Major breakthrough during the days of workshops and practical exercises seemed to be found in common understanding of community and family values, extended to individual expectations and cultural perspectives. The impact of such employee
training is evident in continued success of Latitude 10, whether from the perspective of employees (Gardner, 2017, 2018) or travelers, 90% of whom rate the lodge as excellent (tripadvisor.ca, 2019). The company’s reputation is also evident in the category of intercultural understanding (National Geographic, 2017; Green Hotelier, 2016; Buchmeyer, 2012) and positive contribution to the local community informed by grassroots initiatives such as environmental education and library program for elementary schools (earthequilibrium.org, 2019).

From the programming perspective, employees were given the context for understanding the underlying reasons why visitors may engage in travel in the first place. They began recognizing the shared meanings that tourists communicate and interpret during the process of interaction with local staff—i.e., Symbolic Interactionism programming theory (Fennell, 2002). This process occurred between visitors and staff whenever they interacted, each formulating different perceptions and meanings. Staff were able to recognise these perspectives only through the cultural sensitivity training with further guided communication and interpretation. Management at Latitude 10 made effort to bridge the distance between the host and guest in variety of ways. Whenever possible, there were free English lessons offered to local staff to help them communicate better with visitors. There were talented staff members whose talents were displayed and promoted by the manager, as was the case with an artist and a surfer. Equally important, travelers were educated about the local community and invited to participate in various local efforts, such as through the Earth Equilibrium foundation (earthequilibrium.org, 2019).

Social Exchange Theory offers another lens with direct implications to quality service provision and certification among tourism operators (Fennell, 2002). Participation in tourism experience depends on rewards sought by travelers and the attached personal value. The relationship between the customer and provider is maintained as long as the costs do not exceed benefits. Once staff of Latitude 10 began understanding the costs and rewards of the visitors within the context of their individualist cultures, it was easier to anticipate their expectations and understand the importance of receiving good value for their money. The staff also recognised the direct link between the CST certification of Latitude 10 and visitors' value attached to this effort, which was directly related to their quality training and competitive advantage as staff members of the ecolodge.

The socio-cultural differences between visitors and local employees can be bridged with the use of various Psychological and Social Empowerment perspectives (Scheyvens, 1999). (See Appendix 1). Focusing on Psychological Empowerment of local staff, Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality offered HR training, sustainability certification, specialty training within hospitality and tourism, English lessons, and employee recognition and awards (Cayuga, 2017b; Gardner, 2017; 2018). From the perspective of Social Empowerment, the stability of local community was maintained by offering year-round positions exclusively to local staff and cross-training to avoid seasonal layoffs. Community cohesion in Santa Teresa was no small achievement in rural town where seasonality is common and competition is high. The management team of Latitude 10 was able to incorporate the common goals of the local community into the tourism venture. Consequently, community-based projects became meaningful tourism experience for its guests who could now visit local schools, as one example, and contribute via its Equilibrium foundation (equilibrium.org, 2019). This financially important and ethically meaningful approach made sure that raised funds from individual visitors were applied to community development projects deemed a priority by the hosts.
The quality of local experiences for both hosts and guests depends on the delicate balance between tourist impact and local perceptions. The Typology of Tourists and Influence Upon the Community (Font, 1995; Smith, 1990) can serve as a useful tool to evaluate managerial actions that would ensure socio-cultural sustainability. (See Appendix 2). Management of Latitude 10 has used the intercultural competence training of their staff to inform more positive local perceptions of travelers, and also educate travelers about the local community prior to and during their stay. Equally important, by inviting travelers to participate in locally meaningful projects designated by the community, the management of Latitude 10 helps travelers create positive impact, and therefore also positive local perceptions. This relationship-building is further strengthened by sustainable management practices pertaining to the low number of tourists at the ecolodge, the focus on attracting responsible travelers, and the travelers’ full adaptation to local norms—including those added by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, such as eliminating plastic or removing threatened fish species from its menu (Elliott, 2012; latitude10resort.com, 2019). Although an interesting combination of luxury and sustainability, Latitude 10 Exclusive Beach Resort maintains the delicate balance between visitors and hosts by implementing the three lenses of people, planet and profit of sustainability; cultural sensitivity training being only one of many such approaches.

**Discussion Questions**

**Managerial Questions/Problems**

1. Has the manager of Latitude 10, how would you improve the quality of service? How would you reconcile different expectations pertaining to service quality? How would these expectations differ among the local staff compared to international tourists?

2. Has the manager of Latitude 10, how would you improve employee morale? How would you manage local issues which are present in Santa Teresa? For example, high turnover of employees due to seasonality of employment.

3. Has the manager of Latitude 10, how would you minimise the cultural clash between international tourists and local staff, pertaining to service quality expectations? What can you do to help local staff understand international tourists?

4. Has the manager of Latitude 10, how would you devise and implement long-lasting solutions?

5. In all of these considerations above, what is the role of the General Manager of Latitude 10? What is the role of the VP Operations of Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality?
References


Appendix

Appendix 1. Psychological & social empowerment/disempowerment perspectives.

**Psychological**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Empowerment</strong></th>
<th><strong>Disempowerment</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced self-esteem due to outside recognition of the value and uniqueness of host culture.</td>
<td>No sharing of benefits from tourism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased confidence promotes further education and training.</td>
<td>Hardships due to reduced access to resources now in demand by visitors (e.g., protected areas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in status, especially among women and youth.</td>
<td>Result: some groups confused, frustrated, uninterested or disillusioned with the tourism initiative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Empowerment</strong></th>
<th><strong>Disempowerment</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tourism maintains or enhances the stability of local community.</td>
<td>Disharmony and social decay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community cohesion a result of common goals and work in the tourism venture.</td>
<td>Members take on outside values (e.g., materialism) and lose connection with traditional culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised funds applied to community development projects, e.g., school, roads.</td>
<td>Some members (e.g., women) do not share equitably the benefits from tourism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certain groups compete with one another – jealousy and resentment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Scheyvens (1999)
Appendix 2. Typology of tourists and influence upon the community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of tourist</th>
<th>Number of tourists</th>
<th>Adaptations to local norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explorer</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Accepts fully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Rarely seen</td>
<td>Adapts fully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-beat</td>
<td>Uncommon but seen</td>
<td>Adapts well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusual</td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Adapts somewhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incipient mass</td>
<td>Steady flow</td>
<td>Seeks W. amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised mass</td>
<td>Continuous influx</td>
<td>Expects W. amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Massive arrivals</td>
<td>Demands W. amenit’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Font (1995), adapted from Smith (1990)

What is the CST?

It is a program that aims to categorize and certify tourism companies according to the degree to which their operation approaches a sustainability model. For this, four fundamental areas are evaluated:

1. **Physical-biological environment**
   Evaluates the interaction between the company and the surrounding natural environment, interested in the implementation of policies and programs of sustainability, protection of the environment, among others.

2. **Service plant (This area corresponds to Hosting Establishments)**
   Aspects related to the company's internal systems and processes are evaluated in terms of waste management and the use of technologies to save electricity and water.

2. **Service management (This field corresponds to Tour Operators Agencies)**
   It comprises the process by which the company, considering all the exogenous and endogenous elements, designs a tourism product in accordance with the market trends and the characteristics of the country and the locations where the product will be operationalized.

3. **Client**
   The actions carried out by management to invite the client to participate in the implementation of the company's sustainability policies are evaluated.

4. **Socioeconomic environment**
   The identification and interaction of the establishment with the adjacent communities is evaluated, analyzing, for example, the degree to which tourism companies respond to the growth and development of the region, through the generation of employment or the achievement of benefits in favor of the community.
Authors

Agnes Nowaczek is a Professor at the School of Hospitality, Tourism and Sport at Niagara College, Canada. Outside of academia, Dr. Nowaczek is an Ecotourism Consultant and TICO Certified Travel Counsellor, aiming to create deeper connections between travelers and nature. She has completed projects in Poland, Peru, Costa Rica and North America, all centered around sustainable tourism, and ecotourism in particular. Her professional and academic interests focus on visitor behaviour and management, experiential education and transformational visitor experiences, codes of conduct, ecotourism ethics, policy planning, program design and evaluation. Dr. Nowaczek is currently pursuing several projects related to her earlier work on experiential education for students, as well as new projects examining the authenticity of ecotourism activities and building regional identity and resilience through Culinary Tourism. To support her discipline, Dr. Nowaczek serves as the reviewer of peer-reviewed journals and books, and as the Associate Editor for the Journal of Ecotourism. Email: anowaczek@niagaracollege.ca