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National Parks of Costa Rica: An Environmental History

The history of Costa Rica's society-environment relations, from its twentieth century conservation movements to its modern ecotourism industry offers a broad range of cultural and environmental insights into a country with a small landmass, albeit one rich in biodiversity and ecosystems. The number of transitions Costa Rica's territory and populace have undergone is remarkable, ranging from periods of considerable deforestation and irreparable habitat loss to systemic revaluations of rainforests, volcanoes, watersheds and coastlines. This historical dichotomy can be seen as a catalyst for a change in perception of the national character, further aggravated and shaped by sociopolitical academic and environmental tensions.

This study will primarily examine the ongoing cultural realizations that Costa Rica's national parks and Areas Silvestres Protegidas (ASPs) have fostered throughout the nation since the 1940's. It will also consider how a thriving tourist industry has influenced ASP creation. The ties between national parks, ASPs and ecotourism call for an interdisciplinary angle from which to analyze the history and culture of this nation. The history of knowledge and international knowledge transfer are also crucial to the timeline of the country's environmental accomplishments owing largely to the scientific background and national relevance of influential individuals. The presence of such conservation-minded scholars was not only pivotal in shifting Costa Rica's socioeconomic policies towards environmental protection but also affected the present and future ethnological representations of Costa Ricans' stewardship over nature. This trend can be seen in the context of national park creation, where the legal protections afforded to only a few ASP areas in the system's first years grew to encompass over 25% of the present territory. A selection of national parks as case studies within the ASP system will guide the assessment of relevant anthropological effects arising from local communities' interactions with their natural surroundings. Several research questions for this project include:

- Which key moments in history helped to reverse Costa Rica's misuse of nature (e.g., enactments of laws, natural disasters, periods of social unrest, research agreements, etc.)?
- Has the iconography advanced by a tourist-driven state agenda served to present a false "green vision" of Costa Rica to its citizens and to the rest of the world?
- What practical purpose does the ASP's classification of areas into such varied conservation categories serve?