

Dominica

A study of the island's culture and current issues

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Submitted by

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Abstract

During a three-week study of Dominica, a diverse group of individuals were interviewed in order to gain perspective on the island's culture, conservation issues, and changing economy. We discovered that Dominica is facing some crucial issues. To keep its status as the true nature island but encourage growth of the tourism industry for the economy, major decisions must be made. How will Dominica maintain its major attraction, the environment, with a growing tourism industry?

Introduction

Dominica is an island of the Lesser Antilles between Martinique and Guadeloupe and is commonly known as the "Nature Island" of the Caribbean. Many parts of the island are untouched by industrialization and are the habitats of thousands of species of flora and fauna. The natural environment of the island is what draws ecotourists from around the world. Dominica has become a popular stop for Caribbean cruise ships, but the tourists who only stop in for a day may get a false impression of what Dominica has to offer, since Dominica is not exactly a household name. We had not heard of it until we applied for this Study Abroad program. After living there for three weeks and observing the Dominican people and getting to know them, we have learned that this island is rich in natural resources and has a warm friendly atmosphere. The following report is the information we gathered and observed during our stay in Dominica. We tried to gain an in-depth look at how tourism affects not only the land of Dominica but the people as well, and what was being done to preserve the culture of the land.

Materials and Methods

In order to obtain a broader understanding of Dominica we interviewed a number of people from various backgrounds. We specified questions to each person according to their qualifications or interest. The following people contributed information:

Mona George-Dill

Manager of Springfield Center for Environmental Protection Training and Education

Clem James

Tour guide for Ken's Hinterland Adventures

Terry Raymond

Public relations officer for the "Duke of Edinburgh"

Dominican Youth Service Board

The Dominica Conservation Association

Dominica Junior Chamber of National Youth Council

Youth Environment Service Corps

Henry Shillingford

Program Director of the Dominican Conservation Association

Yvonne Bellot

Travel agent with Whitchurch Travel

Sobers Esprit

Deputy Director Division of Tourism for the National Development Corporation

Colmore Christian

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism

Results

Background

For hundreds of years, Dominica was inhabited by the Carib Indians. It holds the last refuge for the Carib people because it was the last island of the Caribbean to be colonized by Europeans. The Queen of England set aside 3700 acres of land for them in 1903 because the Carib people were disappearing.

In 1493, Columbus discovered the island. Because of the rough landscape and weather it was very hard to colonize. The British captured Roseau in 1761 after the French had already been living in the area. Though the British claimed the island the French inhabitants had a substantial cultural influence (Honychurch, 1995).

Government

The government of Dominica is set up on a Westminster model. They have a president, a prime minister and a multi-party system. There are 21 constituencies at the present time and each is represented by a diplomat in parliament. The president is voted on by the people and is more of a dignitary than a lawmaker. The Prime Minister is also elected and holds the most power.

The Commonwealth of Dominica Police Force is an island force that patrols cities and some villages. We were told by a few locals that the police of Dominica are not very reliable, they show up late, and by that time, they really can't do much. A Fire department is also available on the island but can't get to most places on the island because it is too dangerous. Mona said that the fire department does not come out for things such as wild fires. She said a few years back she watched a hill near her home burn for eleven days. The fire department told her to get everyone out as quick as possible if the fire reaches the house because it will go up in flames.

School system

According to Mona, preschool begins "as soon as the children can walk." Children begin primary school when they are five years old. They can only enter secondary school after they pass a common entrance examination. After high school, the

students can enter the Sixth Form, which is similar to junior college in the United States. Two years in the Sixth Form is equivalent to the first year of college in the States. Then, the students have the option of entering an extension school on the island or going abroad to study at a university. Students can obtain loans or possibly scholarships from international agencies to pay for school. In some cases, the government binds the students to come back to Dominica after college to work for two to four years on the island.

In the schools, all children wear uniforms. This is beneficial to the children because the school avoids becoming an avenue for social class competition. Many subjects are learned in the schools such as business related subjects, sciences, English, and sometimes French or Spanish.

Religion

Christianity is the most widely held form of religion in Dominica. Catholicism is the most popular form of organized religion, but the island also offers other Christian sects such as Anglican, Baptist, Jehovah's Witness, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Christ and others. There are some smaller followings of other religions such as Bahai and Rastafarian. The Rastafarians can be easily spotted with their dreadlocks or head wraps.

The Dress

Western style clothing is popular in Dominica. You will observe that Dominicans wear the same clothes you see in the United States. They do however still try to maintain a conservative style of dress. Mona George-Dill remarked, "the women here seldom wear outfits revealing large amounts of skin, such as the stomach or back. But with the influence of television and tourism we are beginning to see many of the younger generation of women more toward this style."

The traditional dress of the island includes a douillette, which the women wear. This is a dress that was put together by the former slaves who wanted to celebrate their freedom. The pattern of the dress mimicked that of the former slave owners but the people added their own style by making it with bright and contrasting colors. They also wear a tete hat that can show the marital status of a woman. Also, Mona says they wear a lot of gold jewelry around their necks. She once heard someone say that for a people who were in chains, they like to wear chains. This traditional dress is only worn on special occasions, however.

Festivals

Dominicans celebrate their culture through festivals and holidays. For instance, they have a celebration called Carnival every year, which is similar to Mardi Gras. It lasts for two weeks and includes a parade in which people dress up in traditional clothing, women dress in douillettes and the men wear white button up shirts, with a bright red bowtie and belt, and black pants. They have a Creole music festival that encompasses lectures, plays, dances, and both traditional and contemporary Dominican music. This

festival lasts for three days. The Creole day is also a special day where everyone dresses in Creole, speaks in Creole, fixes Creole food, and plays Creole music. Sober explains that the festivals are essential in preserving the culture. The festivals help to demonstrate Dominican pride and to educate visitors of the islands cultural traditions.

Courtship and Weddings

Traditionally, a man would give a woman a grain of gold to show his affection for her. The woman would then melt that gold and make it into a necklace. A woman who was truly in love would wear a strand of her love's hair on a string hanging from her hatpin.

The weddings of Dominica are more like the Western style than African or anything else, though some people do try to have African style weddings. Weddings weren't the common norm until the missionaries came in and stressed its importance. Cohabitation was common on the island, and many people would only get married on their deathbed. It was very common for a man to have many children from many different women, but after the influence of the outside world, this practice is decreasing.

Music

Dominica has its own style of music, which is an up tempo beat using saxophone, drums and many different types of horns. They listen to soca, R&B, reggae, rap, country and pop music.

Sober Esprit explained that the traditional music form is called Jing Ping. Its roots are stretched deep in both African and European cultures. They use instruments such as an accordion, washboard, a bamboo blow horn, and a flat drum that are not very common in many music forms.

Languages

The official language spoken in Dominica is English because the country wanted a language that they could speak, read, and write. But most of the natives speak what is known as patois. Patois is similar to Creole, a broken form of French. Their speech can be somewhat difficult to understand for an outsider. Terry Raymond, who is a native Dominican, said that he slows down his speech when talking to foreigners so that he can be understood. He also encourages other Dominicans to do the same. Some Dominicans can speak different languages like French, Spanish, German, or Chinese.

The Health System

The people on the island of Dominica are generally very healthy, and in fact right now the world's oldest woman is a native Dominican. She is 127 years old and she can still get around. The infant mortality rate is also low according to Mona. The people maintain good health probably because they eat organically grown fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. During our stay on the island, we ate pineapple, watermelon, banana, mango or papaya and drank fresh squeezed juice almost every meal. Clem James told us

that it is very hard for a person to go hungry or suffer malnutrition on the island because fruit is so plentiful. He said that a person can be walking down the road and just pick some fruit up off the trees and by the time the person ended their journey, he or she would be full.

Dominicans use some fruits as medicines. Noni is an herbal medicine used as a cure all. It is a fruit that smells like old socks, according to Clem. They drink the water from the ripe fruit after sterilizing it. There are still a few herbalists on the island, but most people go to traditional hospitals when ill. The hospitals in Dominica don't have the access to many modern medicines and treatments. They can handle mild afflictions, but if a person is seriously ill then they are sent to the hospital on Martinique or somewhere in the states.

Agriculture

Dominica has an abundance and variety of fruit crops all over the island. You can go into Roseau on a Friday to the open market and buy bananas, papaya, mangos, oranges, grapefruit, coconuts, passion fruit, or sour sop. Or you can walk down the road and pull a mango off the tree yourself. It is common for children to pull fruit off the trees for a snack on their way home from school. Many families throughout the countryside grow their own fruits and vegetables. Some bring their crops into town for the village-dwellers to buy. Owning livestock is not common. You may see a cow or goat tied to a tree on the side of the road, but you won't see a herd of anything.

The main export crop in Dominica has been the banana. It has been the life-blood of the country's economy for more than 50 years. Due to adverse environmental factors, disease, and a bad market, the farmers and overall economy of Dominica has seen a sharp decline in banana profits. For years, Great Britain was faithful to provide a good market for the Dominican banana growers. After all, the island belonged to England until 1978. But, after England joined the European Economic Community, the market for the Dominican banana declined due to pressure from large fruit producers like Dole, Chiquita, and Del Monte, and so did the economy of Dominica. Some farmers have tried to diversify their crops with pineapples or other fruits, some have lost hope and turned to other careers like civil service or the tourism industry.

Economy and Tourism

Civil servants are the largest sector of working class of individuals in Dominica. Most of the businesses not run by the government in Dominica are locally owned. The prices of products are increasing slowly because of tourism. In many of the cities where the cruise ships come in, the tourists are willing to pay higher prices for things such as fruit and souvenirs. Some of the merchants are asking the same prices from the locals who may not be able to afford as much. Inflation is not a big problem as of yet because the tourism industry on Dominica is very small compared to tourism on other islands. According to Yvonne Bellot, the reason why tourism hasn't gotten that big yet on Dominica is because most tourists want sun, sand, and surf. Dominica doesn't have the white sandy beaches that most people want; the beaches on Dominica have black sand or are rocky. Henry Shillingford feels that cruise ship tourists are bad for Dominica and that

overnight visitors are good. The people who come off the cruise ships see the island as an underdeveloped nation, which is discouraging to the Dominican people. But tourists who come to stay for a while on the island, appreciate it for its true natural beauty and have a better understanding of the people and culture.

Mona and Terry agree that the government doesn't really have a synchronized plan for tourism. The government doesn't know if they want to make it the nature island (eco-tourism) and leave the environment untouched or add tourist attractions like many others vacation spots. According to Terry, Mona, and other conservationists, Dominica needs to have an integrated national development plan. "We must know the value of what we have, and we must have an understanding of the worth of what we have," says Mona.

Colmore Christian, the Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Tourism, feels that the government must look at several options to relieve the ailing job market after the large decline of the banana crop. Christian explains, "It is hard for a government to chose the perfect plan of progress. Everyday I have many people knocking at my door wanting jobs that are just not available at this time. So the government must use the tourism industry as a means to produce new jobs on the island". He says that remodeling the airport and adding lights on the runway will increase the number of tourists to the island. "The main problem we have now is that Dominica is harder and more expensive to travel to than the other islands " states Christian.

According to The Chronicle, Charles Savarin said that rural tourism is very important to rural areas of Dominica. He said that with tourism there would be increased health systems, security, and more roads in the rural areas. Savarin feels that both the tourists and the residents would benefit.

Tourism has to be linked to other sectors of the economy in order for it to benefit the whole country. Sobers Esprit says that the government is trying hard not to replace agriculture with tourism, but instead is trying to integrate the two. Currently 4 to 5 % of the GDP comes from tourism. The overnight stay visitors have had an 8% increase over the last year. As far as the Dominican people's view of tourists, Sobers claims that they see tourists as a valuable part of life and they enjoy sharing their heritage with the rest of the world. He believes that tourism will increase the job market in other fields as well, such as construction, agriculture, and the service industry. We asked Colmore Christian how Dominicans would try to make sure tourism would maintain a positive effect on the people of the island and he said that a new program was set in place by the government called the Nature Island's Standard of Excellence. The three main goals of the program are to:

- Improve the skills of those who work in the tourism industry

- Increase tourism directed legislation

- Increase awareness of what tourism brings to the island

He says with this program the government hopes to gradually infiltrate tourism into Dominican society. He also feels the program will increase the positive experiences of tourists on the island.

One problem that Henry expressed was that tour guides are competing for customers, so they have to constantly decrease their prices in order to keep the customers coming to them. Colmore Christian explained that in order to alleviate such problems the government has set up a dispatch system that states specific costs of tours and buses to

certain areas so that the tour guides can still maintain a reasonable income. In order to provide more employment opportunities to the Carib village the government has begun to construct a model village within the Carib territory. The model uses traditional Carib designs and helps promote the Carib culture. Christian explained that with this model there should be more visitors to the Carib territory. The increase of tourist to the area should increase agriculture, tour guides, and the sale and manufacturing of handmade crafts in the area.

National Parks

According to Henry, the National Park system has been successful. Because of this program Dominica has been able to protect 20% of its land, which is one of the highest percentages of protected lands in the world. Dominica has the first terrestrial world heritage site, Morne Trois Pitons National Park. National parks are formed mainly to conserve water and biodiversity, and not for tourism, though tourism helps to bring in the money to keep them going. Tourists can come in and buy daily or weekly passes to visit any of the parks on the island. Henry Shillingford says that a fee was enforced three or four years ago for visitors to go into national parks as a way to raise money to conserve them. The parks are free for locals, but the use of them by Dominicans has declined. This decline may be due to cultural changes brought about by cars and television. Now, they have other things to do.

Conservation

There are a few organizations on the island focused on conservation, one of which is the Youth Environmental Service Corps (Y.E.S. Corps). The Y.E.S. Corps, headed up by Terry Raymond, was established to assist and mobilize a corp of young people to be educated in conservation and use it on local and national issues. The camp recruits high school graduates who have to fill out an application and then are interviewed. Twenty applicants are accepted based on their interest and concern with environmental issues. The camp goes on for two months and during those two months the students go through a set of modules. The student must complete the first module before they are allowed to move on to the next. The history, heritage, and tourism module gives a better understanding of who they are and where they came from. The leadership module helps with leadership, self-esteem, and small business development. Other modules include forestry, wildlife, and National Parks, agriculture, coastal marine environment, and waste, energy, and consumption. All these modules are used to give the students other career options they may not have previously explored. Many of the younger generation are not as concerned with environmental issues. They want to bring Dominica into more modern times. Terry says that the children want the things they see on television like skyscrapers and shopping malls. The Y.E.S. Corps was designed to bring the kids back to what is more important.

Another conservation organization is the Dominican Conservation Association. We interviewed Henry Shillingford who is the President of this group. He says that one of the goals of the organization is to advocate for a national development policy that will focus on conservation of the natural state of the island and market that for tourism rather

than changing the island to conform to the market. They do this through education, research, and public policy, and they maintain an active stance in the government on conservation issues and the development of the island. Henry made a point to define eco-tourism. He said to achieve a natural environment, you can't fake it, you have to leave it as it is. He says eco-tourists not only want to observe nature, they want know what it is and how it is used. People want the natural experience in its fullness, which includes the culture of those who inhabit the environment. Henry said that for a true eco-tourism adventure, one must allow the environment to lend itself to the experience. Everyone who comes to the island to stay awhile, knows what it has to offer. Life in Dominica is not like the fast paced world of the more industrial nations and that is what the island has to offer. Henry explained that people come to Dominica to "cool out" like the Arawaks did before the Europeans settled there and brought in the Protestant work ethic. Since then, they have made a full circle. Now visitors appreciate that life on the islands is nothing like what they live everyday in their modernized society.

The DCA has stopped trying to preach to the current generation, but instead are focusing on the younger generation. Seventy percent of their work is through education. They develop eco-tourism education programs that promote coastal conservation, biodiversity, and marine management. The other 30% of their work is toward advocacy of conservation in the political arena.

Discussion

Politics is the arbiter of culture because it decides what can come into and go out of a society. And culture is a major part of eco-tourism, thus politics and tourism are intertwined. In order for tourism to benefit Dominica, the government must be consistent in their policies. Money should stay within the island so that the locals can benefit from selling their goods. Many people have turned to tourism as a career after the downfall of the banana market. But, according to Henry, tourism hasn't grown fast enough for the economy to bounce back. After losing hope in the banana industry, some of the farmers have bought buses or cabs, and competition in that industry is too large for the small tourism market. Also, in discussing government policy, Henry claims that the Dominican government has been inconsistent in promoting the country as "the Nature Island." The government goes to environmental organizations to promote the nature of the island, while at the same time supports whaling by Japan. The DCA wants to change the promotion of Dominica to "the Environmental Island" and change some of their policies to be consistent with their stance of conservation.

Conclusion

In this report we have tried to grasp the island of Dominica from the people's perspective. We interviewed a wide range of people in order to obtain a complete perspective of the island's present and future. One of the common statements made by everyone interviewed was that the government should really make a clear plan of action when it comes to handling the increasing tourism industry. We tried to get all the perspectives that were available and the governmental perspective was given to us through the eyes of Colmore Christian, permanent secretary of the ministry of tourism.

He says that the government is in a hard position and they try to maintain the island and the people but at the same time they have to increase the available jobs on the island. The direction the government should go on the issue of tourism is a very difficult one. In one perspective, if they increase tourism, then they will increase jobs. But in the other perspective, if they if they don't increase tourism, then the people of the island will suffer because there won't be enough jobs after the crash of the banana market.

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Work Cited

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