



Sustainability and Community Tourism in the Amazon Region. The Experience of “Santa Helena Del Ingles”. Collective and Individual Dynamics and the Role of Education

Giovanna Campani

Comparative Cultural Studies, Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Spain

Abstract

While the Amazon biome can be divided into several Amazons, either by social, economic, cultural and environmental characteristics, in the area near Manaus, sustainable and community-based tourism is becoming an important resource for the "ribeirinha communities" (communities, whose members are of mixed origin- called "caboclos"). The main activity of these communities was woodcutter, until this region became a Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS) in 2008. Since the creation of this reserve, the communities had to find other activities. The paper follows the experience of the community of Santa Helena del Ingles (Saint Helen of the English) that, with the support of the Foundation for Amazon Sustainability, progressively developed other means of economic activity, such as sustainable tourism (they built a community hostel), handicrafts, production of natural products to sell the tourists. The opening of the community hostel has created at the same time collaborative dynamics and individual entrepreneurship, when some members have themselves opened new structures for hosting tourists. This new shift, which has seen women as the main actors, has been accompanied by specific university training that has represented an important achievement for people who had never considered this possibility. The paper describes the context and analyses the conditions for the community empowerment. Among the conditions, we underline the participation to a pioneering initiative, implemented by the Nilton Lins University, a graduation in Tourism Management, which began in 2022 in partnership with the Amazon Sustainable Foundation, and offers the course remotely, through distance education, making professional training more accessible to students far from large urban centers. It also includes scholarships. The Nilton Lins course focuses on empowering traditional communities for the development of community-based tourism and fostering local entrepreneurship. Students are guided to explore business opportunities, especially in the areas of accommodation, tours, restaurants, and other services already offered informally.

Keywords: Sustainability, Empowerment, Tourism, Community

Introduction

In November 2025, I did a fieldwork on women's participation in the management of sustainable tourism, as part of a project on sustainability in the Amazon region, in the Rio Negro Comunidade Santa Helena do Inglês, located in the municipality of Iranduba, about 40 km. from Manaus. This article starts from that experience, the article develops some theoretical reflexions about traditional communities, sustainability and ecological issues, processes of modernization/globalization and profit/capitalist logics.



Fig. 1. Community House at Santa Helena, where meetings are held

Santa Helena do Inglês is located within the Rio Negro Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS), established in 2008 for the protection of the Amazon rainforest. The creation of the Rio Negro Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS) brought about major transformations for the 19 communities within the area, whose populations, in addition to fishing and mini-agriculture, lived by selling forest firewood. Following the new territorial statute, and, for ecological reasons, the obligation of stopping with wood extraction, nine communities developed activities related to tourism and crafts.



Fig. 2. View of the Rio Negro from the Pousada (Guesthouse)



My fieldwork focused on women's participation in the management of sustainable tourism, as part of a project on sustainability in the Amazon region. In fact, women seemed particularly favorable to the reconversion imposed for ecological reasons. Most people in the *riberinha* communities were loggers spending their life deep in the Amazon rainforest. *"Before, we lived off logging; it was our only income. But in 2008 logging was prohibited, so it became very difficult for all the communities. Many people left for the capital in search of work. That's when the idea of community-based tourism emerged,"* says Adriana, who has been the first manager of the community guesthouse Vista Rio Negro and now has opened her own place. Women became very active in the new activity, which gave them a prestigious role and allowed the contact with very different people.

Moreover, during the field work, I got to know the specificities of the *ribeirinha* community life, based on a strong idea of collective work and solidarity principles. According to the traditional community life, the decisions are always taken collectively in popular assemblies. This pattern fully worked in the passage from logging to the activity of community tourism.

The project of sustainable/community tourism was introduced and developed with the help the Fundação Amazônia Sustentável (FAS) that suggested as well other alternative activities. The community members opted for tourism because, in the meantime, other communities in the reserve had been working with tourism. The opening of a pousada (red and breakfast) Vista Rio Negro has been a collective work and profits have to be beneficial for the whole community.

The collective choice of tourism is so far seen in a very positive way by the community- as a form of exchange with the foreign people who come to visit and as the best way to preserve their lifestyles and the nature of the forest, accepting the abandon of wood extraction. The experience shows an interesting articulation between the preservation of the traditional way of life, the ecological sustainability and market principles. The article concludes on the conditions that can allow this positive articulation to continue.

The Riverside Communities/Comunidades ribeirinhas in the Amazon Region

The Brazilian Amazon is composed of a variety of indigenous peoples and ethnicities, and a population resulting from miscegenation, called "*caboclo*", a consequence of the colonization and occupation process that occurred in the region (Arenz, 2000). Miscegenation was then shaped through the settlements of missionaries and in the villages of colonists, from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

From 1850 onwards, the *caboclo* population increased due to an intense migration process, mainly from people from the Northeast of Brazil, at a time when the extraction of latex in the rubber plantations (raw material for rubber production) represented a moment of great wealth for the region.

These new residents settled along the riverbanks, giving rise to the term "ribeirinhos" (river dwellers). *"At every mouth of streams and rivers with resources and possibilities for exploitation, there was a post or trading post whose function was to channel the agro-extractive production brought from the interior lands and to drain it to the ports and larger cities."* (CASTRO, 2008, p. 17-18). Even when, after 1910-20, rubber exports declined due to English competition in the Asian colonies, resulting from the smuggling of the seed of the Brazilian rubber tree, the *caboclo* migrants didn't go back and stayed in the Amazon region.

The term "riverside dweller", then, seeks to identify a sociocultural profile of *caboclo* groups that settled on the banks of rivers, in a dynamic space that articulates the relations of sociability and culture within the particularities of that space, where the mark of this configuration can be seen in behaviors, in the way of life, in their food, in their beliefs, in their religiosity, etc., specific to that space. Nowadays the term "*ribeirinha*" community refers mainly to *caboclo* population. In fact, starting in the 1990s, when residents began to identify themselves as indigenous, they replaced the term community with "aldeia" village.



Fig. 3. Adriana is explaining the medical plants

Even marginalized, the “Ribeirinha” communities managed to resist total assimilation, preserving the main axes of their ancestors' culture: economic aspects (integration with nature, plant extraction), social aspects (autonomous living in small communities and work collectively, as many activities, such as fishing, agriculture, and housing construction, are carried out in communal work), and religious aspects (syncretism between Catholicism and practice of shamanism). According to Arenz, they consider that “*the Portuguese language and the Catholic religion are 'bridges' to the world of the 5'whites,' but they did not determine or fully express the social and cultural autonomy of the riverine communities*” (ARENZ, 2000, p. 12). They also have specific legends and specific mythological beings, as the curupira and the mapinguari or ishnashi, forest's monstera and, at the same time, forest's guardians.

Women's participation plays a prominent role in the communities. They actively contribute to family income and are involved in numerous activities. They have also the knowledge of the herbal treatments and they have the role of “curandeiras” (See picture, woman from Santa Helena, explaining the plants that are cultivated and that are used for different treatments).

The role of women was promoted in this new phase when the activities shifted from wood extraction to sustainable and community tourism. Abandoning their main economic activity—logging—wasn't easy and migration eventually occurred. That's why the idea of community-based tourism, proposed by the Fundação Amazônia Sustentável (FAS) appeared as way of saving various communities on the river. That's what happened in Santa Helena. Adriana, who first managed the guesthouse Vista do Rio, among many difficulties, as it didn't always generate enough income, and then has opened her own space, insists on the positive aspects, repeating what she has learned in a training course online she followed at the University Nilton Lins in Manaus: “*Community-based tourism is a way of experiencing a destination from the perspective of those who live there. In practice, this means experiences led by the communities themselves, valuing local culture, generating income, and respecting the Amazon rainforest and way of life.*”



The community of Santa Helena de l'Ingles and the Building of the Posada Vista Rio Negro

The community that nowadays is composed by around 400 people, was founded in 1969 by Demétrio Vidal de Mendonça, father of ten children: *"When I arrived here it was all forest. I arrived single, worked for a year and then got married. I built a family, built a house and started planting crops, but my main activity was logging. I have many stories to tell,"* he recalls. Other families (parents and friends), followed from the Northern part of the Rio Negro, in order to be closer to the city of Manaus, and the community got larger. An Englishman with his wife settled there for a few years, sharing the life of the community. For this reason, Santa Helena became Santa Helena de l'Ingles.

A logger, Demetrio had to stop the activity when the area became protected, as part of the Rio Negro Sustainable Development Reserve, and the community had to live only from planting crops and fishing. The production of the mandioca flour was good, but it was difficult to find a market. With the development of tourism, it became also easier to sell agricultural products. In fact, with tourism being developed, the economy was also boosted by selling what they plant. *"The main difference between the time of deforestation and now is that today we already have someone to sell flour to, we can sell fish, there is a market here, especially for tapioca starch and cassava. Back then, only wood brought in money. We live like this, there is no longer a need to cut the wood that we used to cut, it was very hard work."*

The shift to tourism took place in 2014, with the opening of the guesthouse, with the support of the Sustainable Amazon Foundation (FAS), created in 2008, a non-profit civil society organization that promotes sustainable development in the Amazon. Recognized as a social assistance entity, FAS works to guarantee the rights of traditional populations in riverside communities, indigenous peoples, quilombola communities, and peripheral areas through a systemic approach, contextualized action, social empowerment, development, and innovation.

FAS's work in tourism focuses on Community-Based Tourism (CBT), a modality that promotes authentic experiences, values local knowledge, and generates direct income for families, helping to protect the forest. The goal is to empower forest entrepreneurs. The aim is that people understand, when they start having an awareness focused on tourism, that the forest is much more valuable standing than actually cut down. As for the tourists, they are enchanted by the hospitality, simplicity, and wisdom of the riverside caboclos. This exchange is really appreciated as well by the community dwellers.

The community guesthouse was built in 2014 as a collective work. The community has a president, but all the decisions are taken collectively in democratic debates. The FAS found the grant for the guesthouse and the community built the place, the workers were paid three days and gave two days of work free. The manager and the personnel were chosen in open meetings

The income from the guesthouse was shared collectively. A part of the income remained for ensuring the future functioning of the guesthouse.



Fig. 4. The Pousada Da Dri

Adriana was the first manager, for five years. Now a new person -always woman- was chosen. And finally Adriana has decided to open her own guesthouse, the Pousada Da dri, after a long collective discussion in the village meetings, and, even if the guesthouse is private, the all community has to benefit.

The Nilton Lins University and the Role of Education

The passage of Adriana from employee by the community to self-employed was facilitated by the opportunity to take courses on Tourism at the Nilton Lins University, located in Manaus. The Nilton Lins University's mission is "Educating the Amazon," and this mission is reflected in an education focused on sustainability with strong Amazonian roots, established for about four decades in the heart of the Amazon. Internationally recognized the University frequently receives exchanges and visits from international tourism students especially interested the local ecotourism.

The University offers programs focused on the tourism sector, including a three years degree in Tourism with a strategic focus on the vocations of the Amazon region. The course qualifies professionals to work as managers, guides, and travel agents, with a strong emphasis on ecotourism, sustainability. and hotel management. A part of the program is consacrated to Sustainable Tourism. A tourism professional can work in hotels and restaurants; in airlines and cruise lines; in event organization; in the management of inns, travel agencies and tour operators, transportation, events and leisure, consulting and advisory firms in the area of creation and analysis of tourism projects. They can also specialize in marketing actions aimed at the sector and the management of public policies for the segment.

More, in 2021, recently, always in partnership with the FAS an innovative Tourism Management Technology course, the "University Students of the Forest" program in partnership with FAS, the only one in the country with an Amazonian identity and training for sustainability has been introduced, focusing on training Amazon residents through distance learning. The "University Students of the Forest" program won 2nd place in the National Tourism Award from the Ministry of Tourism in 2025.

Finally, in 2022, in partnership with FAS, the Nilton Lins has opened a new course, offered in the distance learning modality, making professional training more accessible to students far from large urban centers: it is aimed to empowering traditional communities for the development of community-based tourism and fostering local entrepreneurship. Combining higher education with practical experiences, the course guides the students to explore business opportunities, especially in the areas of accommodation, tours, restaurants, and other services that are already offered informally. The program also includes also includes scholarships. Adriana was one of the first beneficiaries of the program, which, she says, changes her professional perspectives and also her vision or herself and her community: "I would have never dreamt, in my best dreams, to go to University and an academic training." She says..



This initiative is practically transforming the educational and socioeconomic landscape of traditional communities in Amazonas with the graduation, at the end of 2024, of the first class of 20 residents from the Rio Negro and Uatumã Sustainable Development Reserves in Tourism Management. João Emanuel, professor and coordinator of the Tourism course at Nilton Lins, highlights the power of education as a tool to empower and create opportunities for the Amazonian population and the importance of qualification for the communities involved.

"In addition to the skills to manage tourism ventures and provide a solid economic base in the medium term, resulting in the creation of new jobs, the training promotes the appreciation of the rich cultural traditions of the communities."

The professor also emphasizes that the course addresses the need for environmental preservation. "Activities that are major attractions for visitors, such as artisanal fishing, forest walks, and river and beach tours, are only possible with respect for fauna, flora, and sustainability," he points out.

The course curriculum covers fundamental subjects, including hotel design, team management, entrepreneurship, art, culture and heritage, as well as event management. With the graduation of the first class approaching, the coordinator reveals that the goal is to expand the initiative to other traditional communities in the interior of the state.

Conclusions

The way of life of the riverside communities, whose daily lives are directly influenced by the river flows and by the forest, has undergone social, political, economic, cultural, and territorial transformations.

Considering the perspective of the territory used, it is appropriate to reflect on the use of the Amazonian territory in the context of the globalized world. For Santos (2001), globalization is, in a way, the apogee of the internationalization process of the capitalist world. The new world order, which he calls perverse globalization, is sustained by a dominant ideology that overvalues the market and encourages consumption, competitiveness, and individuality, to the detriment of solidarity and morality. "*An overwhelming market, said to be global, is presented as capable of homogenizing the planet when, in fact, local differences are deepened*" (SANTOS, 2001, p. 19).

Regarding the Amazon region, Hurtienne (2009) states that the Amazon has always been considered by global society as one of the last frontiers for the exploitation of resources in the expansion of the world economy, an economic space for the accumulation of national and international capital. However, from an ecological point of view, it is considered one of the last biological reserves, an immense deposit, a climate stabilizer, a patrimony of global society that needs to be cared for.

These two dimensions that make up this discourse, the economic and the ecological, are opposite and contradictory, since the dominant model of globalization is based on the exploitation of non-renewable and difficult-to-recycle resources.

However, some local experiences seem to be able to combine ecology and improvement of local populations. The case of sustainable tourism in Santa Helen of the Ingles seems one. The experience shows an interesting articulation between the preservation of the traditional way of life, which is also put in value by the education process through the work of the University Nilson Lins, the ecological sustainability and income generation activities. This positive articulation is possible as far as the collectivity and solidarity principle inside the community is preserved: this seems to be the case so far and is even reinforced by the growing role of the women; however, the continuous support of the FAS and, more recently, the role of the University in training the local people are also a condition for this positive articulation. The University shows the power of education as a tool to empower and create opportunities for the Amazonian population and the importance of qualification for the communities involved. The FAS organizes as well training course to develop other activities of crafts and natural cosmetics. Together with the FAS, national and local governments have also given support with the introduction of solar panels that represent an important resource both for everyday life and tourism. Finally, the type of tourism -community tourism- that is promoted is practiced by a very specific type of public that is interested in exchange with people and connection with



nature more than leisure and luxury. All these aspects contribute to preserve the experience by a logic of profit and exploitation.



Fig. 5. Solar Panels

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