

Human Impacts Institute visits Puerto Viejo in the Caribbean of Costa Rica

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On Monday morning we headed to Bri Bri near Puerto Viejo along the Caribbean coast. Working with Carolina from [Fundecooperacion](#), the crew was comprised of Melissa and I, two business and marketing students from the National University, a well-established Costa Rican artisan named Lil, the Founder of [IE'PA](#), an NGO working with indigenous artisans to promote and market their work, and a specialist in tourism. The goal of the project was to have two days of workshops with the Kekoldi community of Talamanca to investigate how they might increase their income from artisanal wears. The Kekoldi community is an indigenous community that has developed a name for themselves in conservation circles.

To Eat or Not to Eat: Is that the Question?

One of their main bread-and-butter activities is the breeding and release of green iguanas, which are an endangered species in Costa Rica (check stat). It was interesting to see the different stages of the iguanas' development and the low-tech, yet obviously successful initiative of the [Kekoldi](#). According to one community-member who talked with us about the process, they have released hundreds of thousands of the reptiles over the lifetime of the process. One thing that really stuck out for me was that there was confusion as to whether the community both released and consumed the iguanas. To some who we talked, they said that the community did not eat the iguanas at all.

However, another woman from the community who met with our group told us all about the iguana and iguana meat, organs for medicine, skin for drums, etc is a Kekoldi tradition. As an outsider, this disparity in stories was both perplexing and reflective of one of the key issues that emerged from the workshops themselves: many local communities have a sense of what "tourists" want to see, buy, or hear, not all of which is accurate or beneficial to the community. I'm curious as to why some community members would tell us that they did not eat the iguanas. I very much doubt that they wouldn't know that it's a tradition, or that some people do and I wonder if it's more of a response to what they think a Gringa like me would want to hear.

For me, I would love to see that the community is both working to conserve biodiversity and a distinctive species in the region. If they are also using some of these animals as a sustainable source of low-fat, high-protein food for the community, then that is a great value added. For others, however, I think many of the "typical tourists" have an idealized view of what it means to be indigenous: something like they are all "one with nature", non-violent communities overflowing with social equity. This cultural stereotype is one that, in my opinion, does a lot of harm in blocking honest communication between the indigenous communities and the visitors.

Putting More Art in Artisan

The team brought together by IE'PA and Fundecooperacion were an interesting bunch. As Carolina had pointed out, one of the distinguishing characteristics of IE'PA is that they have actually worked in Bri Bri communities for a few years. As is true in many places, indigenous communities are often treated as peoples to be researched or recipients of handouts. So,

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the development of a longer-term ongoing relationship enables IE'PA to begin to build the trust of locals. As is true around the world, however, it's hard to engage community members in action outside of their daily routines; We all get busy, have differing priorities, are maybe having a bad day and don't feel like a workshop, or maybe—as is the case for many of the Kekoldi community—you just might not feel up to the two hour walk to the community center.

Lil led the workshop and began with surveying the artisan work of the community, taking photos, and noting the materials used. As the mounds of maracas, woven bracelets, and small carved contraptions for carrying water piled up, the need for the workshop was evident: the majority of the goods being made were not something most tourists would buy and the prices set did not reflect the amount of time spent on the piece. Lil continued the workshop by focusing on how participants see their own community. She asked them questions like, "What plants are special in your community? Animals?" and other reflecting their traditions, "How do you cook?" With these questions, Lil began to document the unique components of the Kekoldi community that she would soon highlight as ways to enrich their work for tourists.

From Maraca to Wine Glass

On the second day of the workshop, I was excited to be able to participate with ideas of how to transform some of the local work. Lil and I thought overnight about how we didn't want to come up with ways to create whole new traditions, but instead to think of how to adapt traditional artisan work to what tourists would actually buy—with the end goal of increasing the income of the community. For me, the carving on the pieces was beautiful, but the lack of utility, problematic. We decided that the first step would be to show examples of what a "tourists" life might be like in comparison to the Kekoldi.

Lil showed pictures of our homes in NYC and the streets of Holland, as well as a photo with the ground covered in snow and the bare trees of winter. The goal was to give a feel for how different our lives are and how we, as tourists, might appreciate the animals, leaves, and spaces of the Kekoldi community in their artisanal goods.

Then came the ideas, which included transforming the maraca—which I explained to the surprise of the community, that very few people play in my culture—into a wine glass or cup. We also showed photos of how the water carriers could easily transform into plant holders or lamps. One of the comments from a male participant in the workshop was that he enjoyed seeing his work (the maraca that I took a picture of and then made changes in Photoshop for new products) transformed into something else and that it was important for him since he had so many of the goods that were on display in his home. Lil continued the workshop with techniques to create series of products that might entice tourists into buying more than one good at a time, as well as tracing techniques to improve the flow of designs and decrease the amount of time needed to make a product.

Although the workshops were small, participants were engaged and seemed to share common goals of wanting to adapt their handcrafted goods. However, when we opened the questions up for them to ask Melissa and I questions, as "tourists" in their community, the biggest question seemed to be, "how can we get more tourists here?" For me, this question is a scary one; More isn't always better.

Tourism may be necessary to the community and may be the solution to the Kekoldis' economic needs, however, us Gringos often brings a whole new set of, unforeseen and irreversible problems.

By Tara DePorte, Founder and Executive Director, [Human Impacts Institute](#)