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**Negotiating Local Food Production in the  
Monteverde Zone:  
From Farmer to Market**

**Globalization and Health Field School 2006  
USF—Monteverde Institute**

**Hannah Helmy  
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## **Introduction**

The University of South Florida, in collaboration with the Monteverde Institute, conducts a summer field school in Monteverde, Costa Rica in which student groups carry out community based research. This project has its basis in themes identified by the Monteverde community in 2001, and builds on previous research done by past groups enrolled in the field school. Specifically, the 2004 study sought to determine factors influencing food choice, modes of food procurement, barriers to access, quality and availability, underlying factors in food pricing, and community solutions. It also identified the desire for a *feria del agricultor* (farmers' market). The 2003 research team researched the prevalence of obesity in Cañitas and Cerro Plano through examining food security, characteristics of diets, parent vs. child perception of diets, and obstacles to food access. In 2002, an assessment of food insecurity and perceptions of nutrition and food resources in the Monteverde Zone was done through various anthropological methods. Research showed a high degree of nutritional knowledge in the communities, but a lack of quality nutrition due to economic limitations.

After reading these studies, and talking to an individual with experience in the field, designated as our community advisor, we decided to focus on local producers' experiences

with planting and selling their crops. We also wanted to investigate the perceptions and needs of the community with respect to access to locally grown produce. These were deemed key domains of inquiry, prerequisites for any future project intending to improve food distribution and nutrition in the Monteverde Zone.

## **Goals of the study**

The project aimed to examine cultivation and distribution experiences of food producers within the Monteverde Zone in the context of globalization, with the intention of identifying potential markets and strategies for the continuation of sustainable agriculture, as well as improving the nutrition and well-being of the community. Our specific objectives were to investigate the experiences of local agricultural producers with the sale of their products, the access to and the desire for, local agricultural products on the part of the consumers, and the practices and needs of those who buy food for local restaurants. In addition, we aimed to identify strategies to increase the access, both of producers to the market, and of consumers to their desired products.

## **Methods**

### *Study population*

Our study population consisted of individuals involved in agriculture, restaurant owners, and tourists in and around the Monteverde Zone. This was an exploratory study utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. We conducted observational studies, sixteen semi-structured interviews, and sixty-six survey questionnaires.

### *Methods used for recruitment of participants*

Eleven of the semi-structured interviews were with individuals involved in agriculture, and five interviews were with food buyers in the restaurant business. We obtained twenty-one of our surveys from restaurants through convenience sampling. Twenty

more were obtained through convenience sampling with tourists. The remaining twenty-five surveys were procured during a community health fair, held in Cañitas, on July 6, 2006. Initially we obtained our first few interviews, with individuals involved in agriculture, through personal recommendations. After these initial interviews, we identified further participants via snowball sampling.

#### *Data Collection*

For all interviews we visited each respondent once. Our interviews consisted of a questionnaire that we created with the help of our faculty advisor previous to the interview. All questions to respondents were given orally with one or more team members recording the response. Our surveys were also created prior to distribution with the help of our faculty advisors. Some of our surveys were given orally, some were dropped off and picked up at a later time, and the others were given and completed immediately.

#### *Protection of participant confidentiality*

Participants were assigned numbers and no personally identifying information was collected. Consent was obtained from all project participants and they were asked to decide whether or not to participate upon hearing the project description and interview/survey process. An informed consent form in Spanish or English was provided to each participant prior to interviews/surveys, allowing time for questions and the option of refusing to participate in the project. Willing participants were then asked to sign a consent form. All notes were left at the Monteverde Institute upon completion of the final presentation.

#### *Data Analysis*

All data from interviews was typed up as it was acquired. When data acquisition was finished all data was entered into a data base. After all gathered information was entered, data was analyzed and a presentation was prepared for the community.

## **Study limitations**

This study was conducted in an extremely abbreviated time frame, which translated into fewer opportunities to explore the meaning behind some of our survey responses, and recruit more participants. In addition, our respondents were not selected randomly, which may have introduced bias into our data. None of the investigators were native speakers of Spanish; this made it more challenging to understand the rural dialect of some of the respondents.

## **Results**

Our data fell into three general categories: opinions and perceptions of local agricultural producers, those responsible for purchasing produce in local restaurants, and tourists in the Monteverde Zone. In our conversations with local producers, some important recurring themes emerged, including the overarching theme of the challenges they confront. The three most commonly mentioned challenges were: economics, changes in lifestyle, and natural obstacles to cultivation.

The economic challenges emerged in the responses to several of our research questions, and encompassed the higher costs of living and production, and assertions like, “I cannot support myself and my family,” and “I can’t compete with the supermarket.” Another farmer told us, “I am not supporting myself with what I’m doing right now, and that’s why I am working part time as a day laborer.”

A second important trend that surfaced in our interviews involved lifestyle and changes therein. The lifestyle of a farmer is not necessarily appealing to everyone. Many mentioned that most people prefer other opportunities, especially involving tourism. For example, a man told us that “Almost nobody likes to work on the land. They like the office, the money, and the easy life more.” Others that cultivate don't have an interest in selling, and

prefer instead to produce solely to satisfy family needs. Still others don't have the time for growing and working full time. Various people also commented that the new generation is not interested in being farmers.

There was a high degree of consensus that natural obstacles to cultivation, including topography, rain, wind, and blight, were prevalent. Taken together, these characteristics of the region contribute to difficult circumstances for growing and unstable production.

The following three challenges were cited less frequently by the producers, but remain important considerations nonetheless. In this era of increasing tourism, some uses of the land, especially those related with tourism, are much more profitable than others. This leads some community members to reconsider dedicating their land to cultivation. As a member of the community asked us, “If you have land, are you going to plant, or are you going to build some cabins?” However, tourism isn’t the only redistributive force; development and growth of the communities of the Zone also potentially contribute to a loss of cultivated lands.

An additional challenge that local producers experience stems from a global level: trade agreements, like CAFTA, for example. Some of the small scale producers have expressed the conviction that they can not compete with transnational companies, and that they do not think that this type of production will benefit Costa Rica. One producer gave as an example about the banana plantations that use many chemicals in the Atlantic Zone. Being foreign companies, they produce, take the earnings and go, leaving Costa Rica with “bad soil, sick men, and none of the money.”

Another effect of the increasing exchange of people, ideas, and goods manifests in a different challenge for the producers of fruits and vegetables of the Zone. Even though the tourists that visit the Zone represent a large demand of food, it’s not a stable demand because of seasonal variations in tourism. On the other hand, provisioning the big hotels of the Zone can be too much for small scale producers, which describes the majority of local growers.

Producers also mentioned a perceived lack of training and support, which may be compounded by the fact that many of them have little experience growing in the Zone, as historically this was a dairy producing region. More specifically, at least one producer noted the lack of governmental support. A possible result of this neglect could be the misuse of agricultural chemicals, such as pesticides. According to one farmer, “One must be realistic, but in Costa Rica they don’t use chemicals correctly.” It is necessary “first, to train those who sell them,” and after, those who use them. However, this remains a contested issue, as demonstrated by the comments made by one community member at a presentation of our results in Cañitas.

Despite these many challenges, the producers have developed ideas and strategies to confront the challenges they face. First, the majority stressed the importance of greenhouses, which mitigate the severity of environmental obstacles that make farming difficult in the Zone. Of their use, said one producer: It’s “the ideal; if I could afford to cover all of this, [speaking of his land] I would do it.” In addition, they intend to sell more produce, utilize more social networks to facilitate this process, and incorporate new produce to satisfy the tastes of the tourists, for example, basil and rhubarb. To counteract the lack of support that was previously discussed, some have petitioned for support from governmental institutions, such as Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje or Instituto Mixto de Ayuda Social and participate in occupational training programs. Some have even taken courses in marketing and organic cultivation. Finally, to increase the profitability of agriculture, some have combined their production with tourism.

One resource producers in the Zone do lack is an administrative platform that would facilitate the sale of their products. This kind of organization would be useful in other venues as well; it would provide them with a way of coordinating among themselves to achieve greater market penetration, and greater bargaining power vis-a-vis the government. In the

opinion of someone heavily involved with agriculture in the Zone, “the initiative has to come from the producers.” However, the independence of the farmers can tend to impede this process, and it seems that the perception of weak community support is discouraging to them. In this vein, several farmers emphasized various challenges related to the possibility of having a farmers’ market. For this reason, we evaluated the perceptions and attitudes of the community toward locally grown produce.

As previously stated, a study conducted in 2004 reported on the limited availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in the Zone. Hence, we sought to discover whether this was still a concern on the part of the community. Since one of the recommendations of that earlier report was to establish a farmers’ market, we sought to confirm this in our investigation. Our study also encompassed the interest of the community in obtaining locally grown produce through other sources.

The information gathered through our surveys provided insights into both community and local restaurant needs, and has been represented in graphs in the Appendix. The first graph demonstrates where people of one of the communities in the Zone buy produce for their homes. Nearly 50% of the sample buys their produce from the Supermarket. Additionally, more than a quarter obtain produce from their own gardens/crops. The second graph demonstrates that restaurants in our sample also obtain most of their produce from the Supermarket.

Although the majority of those surveyed bought produce in the Supermarket, we discovered that the desire for locally grown produce was generalized—90% of restaurants and 100% of families in our sample expressed this interest. The owner of one of the restaurants affirmed, “I would buy everything local, even things that I can get cheaper elsewhere, if it were possible, because you know who you’re buying from, because of a sense of brotherhood, and because it’s better [quality].” Nevertheless, we saw a marked contrast

between community members and restaurants when we asked whether they knew of a place to buy locally grown produce. More than 90% of the families were aware of a place to buy them, while less than half of the restaurants possess that knowledge (See third graph). Given the interest in local produce, we thought it important to know where people in the community would prefer to buy it. The most common response was a farmers' market, followed by a special section in the supermarket, information which could be interesting for anyone interested in starting a *feria*.

## **Conclusions and recommendations for future research**

An interesting topic that came up during the research was the strong preoccupation with the use of agrochemicals and the damaging effect they can have on health, specifically in regards to the high rate of cancer in Costa Rica. This led many people to comment on the importance of organic cultivation, but we discovered that the definitions of "organic" varied tremendously. Many times organic seemed to be conflated with freshness, and locally grown production. Others defined it as the result of a process of formal certification, something in which local producers have not engaged. In spite of this ambiguity, many people declared themselves in favor of organic produce (see graph 5). In our surveys we asked participants how much they would be willing to pay for organics in comparison with what they pay for their regular produce. Over 70% of community members stated they would be willing to spend more for organics. In contrast, slightly less than 30% of the restaurants surveyed reported that they would be willing to pay more for organic produce, and 42% reported that they did not know how much they would pay. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that those surveyed at the restaurants may be thinking in terms of profits as opposed to feeding their own families. They also expressed concern about the lack of organic

certification of the local producers. Taken together, these data illustrate the potential feasibility of organic production—something that should be given more in depth study.

Another significant finding of our study was that many agreed with the need for an administrative platform in order to better the conditions of the local producers. One person who was interviewed expressed this sentiment as: “It’s not enough to have Money, it’s not enough to have land, it’s not enough to have all the best circumstances. What’s necessary is a strong effort at cooperation.” Although we couldn’t explore this topic in the depth it warrants, the results of the investigation indicate that the form such an organization would eventually take should respond to and reflect the needs of the community.

An additional means of adapting to the changes occurring in the Monte Verde zone that interested many of the producers was agrotourism. In order to find out more about the feasibility of such efforts, we gave surveys to 20 tourists who were visiting the Zone. We discovered that, of the tourists of varying ages and nationalities that we surveyed, 90% had either already participated in agrotourism or expressed an interest in doing so. In general, they preferred to take tours that included several products and activities in an “authentic” environment—which is to say, not one belonging to a big company. This also appeared to reflect the sentiments of one of the farmers we interviewed, when he said, “It’s the only place in the country where the tourists can come and learn.”

In summary, it was widely recognized that tourism brings both challenges and opportunities for those living and farming in the Zone. Knowing how to take advantage of those opportunities may result in some beneficial secondary effects, such as: greater financial stability, greater variety and higher quality of fruits and vegetables for the community and especially for the families of the producers. This could then translate into improved nutrition in the entire Monteverde zone.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Appendix**

Copy of IRB

Copy of Informed Consent Form (in English and Spanish)

Farmer Interview Instrument

Restaurant Interview Instrument

Restaurant Survey

Tourist Survey

Graphs 1-5