

EXPLORING DOMINICA'S RECOVERING (EMERGING) ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY THROUGH SMALL BUSINESS OPERATIONS

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PROLOGUE:

When I originally wrote my sabbatical application Hurricane Maria had not happened. In September of 2017 a category 5 hurricane devastated Dominica, killing 31 people, knocking out power to the entire island nation, no access to potable water, internet and many homes had been washed away, those that survived had no roofs, or were buried under rubble, earth and debris from massive landslides. My original plan was to go in December of 2017 however, after much consideration; I decided to still go but delayed until January of 2018.

As it was my second time to the island, the shock of the devastation was even more impactful than what I had prepared myself to see. The entire thick tropical rainforest was now nothing but sticks; ground that had never received direct sunlight was now exposed. The airport had been fixed enough to be used but was by no means complete. The suffering of the people was hard to see; roads were washed out, many impassable, which meant that people were still stuck on the island with little or no access to basic needs.

When I arrived to my "job" I couldn't believe it. All that was left of a once thriving small ecotourism resort was the brand new pool full of debris and rotting water. Furniture and broken debris were scattered across the property, the river had rerouted itself, and the two new cottages were unusable. It was overwhelming to see how much destruction there was from Maria.

Hearing the stories of those who hid in their homes described a howling wind that was terrifying and incredibly loud and seemed to last forever. The vibe of the island was hard to see – people suffering, those who did not have very much had nothing now.

The government was not providing the basics and making donations very difficult to send. I saw hundreds of shipping containers filled with donations and hurricane relief items rotting in the docks because there was no emergency management plan in place.

So instead of helping a small thriving business grow and develop, I had the experience of trying to help get the place up and running with a slew of revolving

volunteers that had come to the island to help. The experience was rewarding and challenging and I learned so many things about emergency management, politics, the fact that climate change is real and those with the least seem to suffer the most.

Three months was not enough time to get Rodney's Wellness Retreat back up and running, but, I was still able to work everyday to get key components, such as the bar and restaurant progressing before I had to return home.

I was able to meet Bill Clinton as he toured the Caribbean islands destroyed by Maria. I was able to meet with the President of Dominica to discuss progress and the plan going forward to replace ruined infrastructure with Hurricane ready buildings and an electrical system that can withstand a Cat 5 hurricane. Unfortunately the plan did not actually match what was happening on the ground. Electrical lines were being hung like the old ones, tin roofs were replacing the destroyed tin roofs and roads were being fixed but not rebuilt to withstand major flooding and landslides.

I spent a week with the Red Cross canvassing each and every residence to determine who lost their roof, what type of roof it was, and whether or not there was any loss of life. This was a challenging project because everyone had a horrible experience to share. We did determine however, that those houses with hip roofs were able to survive the hurricane.

INTRODUCTION:

Dominica (often confused with the Dominican Republic) is one of the last underdeveloped gems of the Caribbean. It is known as the Nature Island. My PhD focused on sustainable tourism development. During my time researching and writing my dissertation I sought out great examples of developing countries who were "doing it right". Dominica was one of two countries (Seychelles was the other) that consistently proved to practice sustainable growth, community participation, and limited outside investment. It had always been a goal of mine to visit Dominica and see first hand what sustainable tourism development looked like.

GOALS:

I had three major goals in mind:

1. To gain current, practical, relevant, and hands-on industry experience in all areas that I teach, which include Hotel Operations (HRTM 230 and 231), Hospitality Marketing (HRTM 110), Restaurant Operations (HRTM 105), Tourism (HRTM 104), and Sustainability (HRTM 220). Our industry is very experiential, so in turn our course work must reflect this. It is a richer and deeper educational experience for my students if I have current and relevant hospitality activities that reflect the content of the courses.

RESULT:

I definitely gained hands-on experience, however, it was how to restart a devastated hospitality business with no infrastructure instead of improving what was already in progress. Figuring out how to rebuild the front desk area, the restaurant and bar, and find workers to help us rebuild the structures proved to be challenging!

2. To see sustainable tourism development in action. Since my work on my PhD and dissertation I have not had the opportunity to experience this first-hand as an “employee” only as a traveler and academic what this really entails and what it looks like on a day-to-day basis. I have many theories about whether or not it is actually even possible to have tourism development that still protects the environment, the society, and is economically viable for the local communities.

RESULT:

I actually saw the opposite of this during the rebuilding of the islands infrastructure. Dominica had the opportunity to rebuild from the ground up, solar and wind energy systems were offered from European countries, sustainable building classes were offered to help Dominicans rebuild their homes in a sustainable and hurricane proof manner, but all of it was declined. Dominica chose to rebuild in the exact manner of what had just blown away.

3. To develop an international ecotourism opportunity for our students. Our industry is very much relationship based. The more networking that we can do and the more relationships we can build, the more opportunities there will be for our students. In conversations with my current and former students, as well as the alum that accompanied me on my first trip to Dominica, the feedback has been that students are hungry for an experience such as this. To be able to travel to a foreign land, work in the industry, experience sustainable tourism in action,

and gain experience that will help them as they move forward and develop careers of their own. Many of our students find the idea exhilarating but overwhelmed with the idea of trying to plan and do something this grand on their own. I hope to use my own ten-week experience at Rodney's Wellness Retreat as a base model of what a co-op experience will look like.

RESULT:

This was probably the most successful outcome of my sabbatical. I was able to really solidify many relationships with tourism vendors on the island and the idea of student co-ops was received positively. I am currently researching how to put on a summer tourism class to take students to Dominica for a six-week intensive sustainable tourism development class. When I surveyed my students, many of them said that they would be eager to have this opportunity.

SUMMARY:

I believe that for any faculty member who teaches a trade (hospitality and culinary most commonly are considered a trade) it is invaluable to have current and relevant experience from which to draw for inspiration, course material, and talking points. I believe that there are several benefits to our CAHM department and program as well as our students. Some of these benefits include:

- ~ An overall excitement for the project and the possibility of inspiring one or more students to think big and maybe set a goal higher when they see someone else do it and pave the way.
- ~ Our CAHM advisory board will be interested to hear about the experience at one of our meetings and may be interested in hearing about what I learned from this experience.
- ~ Oregon's ecotourism sector is growing; I may be able to help guide some future students who plan to open their own small business that focuses on a similar ecotourism business model to Rodney's Wellness Retreat.
- ~ We have been recognized by one of our accrediting bodies – The American Culinary Federation- as having one of the top ten integrated sustainability programs in the country. This experience will not only compliment what we are already doing in our CAHM program, but I am hopeful that I will bring back more that we can do and will be excited to share with my colleagues any new and/or improved ideas that we can integrate into our curriculum and our learning laboratories.

While no one could have planned for a major category 5 hurricane to hit Dominica, I am glad that I still went and participated in the recovery. My original goals for the sabbatical experience shifted due to obvious reasons, however, I really feel like I learned so much more. When I discuss climate change in my sustainability class I have some harrowing stories to share with the class. I saw several countries come together to help the tiny island nation of Dominica to help in the recovery effort. Today, Dominica is still in the recovery stage and may be for years to come. Every hurricane season is a reminder that everything is temporary.