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Paradise in Peril

Introduction to Costa Rica

Amidst the mist of greenly-fringed mountains, Costa Rica overlooks both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Though slightly smaller than the size of West Virginia, and the second smallest of Central American nations, its 1,290 kilometer coastline provides this proud country with majestic mountains, sandy beaches, lush valleys, powerful waterfalls, and steep volcanoes. The subtropical and tropical climate of Costa Rica also provides fresh fruits and vegetables, textiles, coffee, and tourism.

Costa Rica was discovered by the Spaniard world traveler, Christopher Columbus. Of course every world history textbook will read, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Columbus, however, did not land in this tropical region until his fourth voyage to the Americas in 1502. He did not find the surplus of gold he wanted. He instead discovered fertile soil and a mild climate. The Spaniards built large plantations and small farms to grow crops for the new settlement. Columbus named this paradise Costa Rica, or "rich coast" in Spanish. Spain ruled these native Costa Ricans for 300 years until 1821 when Costa Rica, along with other Central American nations, declared their independence from Spain. Costa Rica announced its individual independence as a republic in 1838, and September 15th is now their Independence Day.

Costa Rica's 51,100 square kilometers of fertile land are split into seven provinces. With a population of only 4,195,914, it is hard to believe so many people can live in this amount of space. The United States, in comparison, has a land area of 9,161,923 square kilometers with 303,824,640 people living there. Even with no regular military forces, Costa Rica is the most visited Central American nation with a yearly \$1.9 billion tourism industry. Agriculture, an easily overlooked industry of Costa Rica, seems to be fading. Because of the effects of global changes, yields can be dropped 10% for every 1 degree rise of Celsius. Costa Rica's main natural resource is hydropower. Rain shortages have threatened these hydroelectric power plants and this could negatively affect power sources for native Costa Ricans and tourists. With high hopes, Costa Rica is reaching to be the first developing nation to become carbon neutral by 2021 and become more environment-friendly.

Costa Ricans take pride in referring to themselves as 'ticos' and 'ticas' and the phrase "Pura Vida" translated as "This is living" is a common greeting on the street. Native Costa Ricans may not be living the carefree life that the country's vacationers experience if those without employment and sufficient wages cannot afford the necessities. Although other countries are struggling to obtain food, Costa Rica has the access for its people, but not the appropriate distribution.

The Typical Tico Family

Family ties in Costa Rica are very strong and are traditionally large. They are composed of many relatives that may all live under the same roof including grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts, parents, and children. Women of the family mainly rule the household while the men work. Most members of the family will stay within the home until they marry or go to college. Family support is also very important to Costa Ricans. Church and school events are rarely attended without the family. Larger families, however, are decreasing but the adobe or simple ranch houses are still full of culture. Food in a typical home consists of mainly home-grown and local crops and produce. Diets vary, but most rely on vegetables, fruits, rice, and beans. In some lower income homes, black beans and rice are eaten all three

meals a day. Wealthier families will usually eat corn tortillas, white cheese, fish, chicken, pork, or beef with their black beans and rice. Coffee, sweet water and juice are distinctive refreshments for the day. A Costa Rican's diet and health is directly affected by the amount of fiber and nutrients available in the food. Education is also an important aspect of Costa Rican culture and high standards.

Costa Rica's government believes every citizen should receive an education. With a literacy rate of 96%, Costa Rica has one of the highest rates in Latin America. Both primary and high schools are found within almost every community. Barbed wire fences shield the playground and learning facilities from street goers. The average student will complete 10 to 12 years of schooling. Average courses include mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language. Music, religion, and art are offered as possible electives. Although schooling is free and only attended three to four hours a day, many low-income families can not afford school uniforms. In addition, many rural schools cannot afford appropriate textbooks for the students. But those who finish the 11th grade receive a diploma. Those who can afford a college education may attend one of the many public and private universities.

Most Costa Ricans are reasonably wealthy when contrasted to other Latin American countries. Using developed world standards, Costa Ricans are poor. An average working family earned an income of 10,300 United States dollars in 2007. For the past 20 years, poverty, or struggling to survive day-to-day, has consumed around 20% of the population. The unemployment rate is 4.6% and 3% of the population is living a dollar or less a day. As a result of unevenly distributed wealth, an average income in parts of northern lowlands is barely 1/7 of that earned in Costa Rica's capital, San Jose. Since the nineteenth century, Costa Rica's most important product has been coffee. Coffee is exported and is widely sold throughout Costa Rica. Bananas, tobacco, pineapples, cotton, and cocoa are also very important agricultural products because they grow well in that climate. Cattle raising has increased in its export value and is a rising contribution to possible access to meat for the population. Hydropower plants provide rural residents with seasonal jobs that provide sufficient electricity. But Nicaragua, a bordering country to the north, has contributed some problems to Costa Rica's economy. An estimated 10% of the Costa Rican population is made up of Nicaraguans. These legal and illegal migrants come to Costa Rica for seasonal work opportunities and then return after their employment ends.

Costa Rica's labor force was estimated at 1.92 million in 2007, which is less than half the total population, excluding migrating Nicaraguans. Employment is split in three parts which include services, industries, and agriculture. Service, such as those at restaurants, hotels, and tourism agencies, contribute 64% of employment. Industry takes up 22% including the export of construction materials, food processing, and clothing. Agriculture contributes the remaining 14% to employment. Farmers provide melons, sugar, and coffee to be exported to places like the United States. The real foundation of Costa Rica is its services to Costa Ricans and travelers. Employment varies from the cities to the forests, but most workers live in the city to provide their service. Women may leave the abode early to clean homes for the day. Men work the early shift at McDonalds, a gift shop or the local supermarket. Young men may guide a zip lining tour around a volcano for a high school group from Iowa. Tourism in Costa Rica today is likely the most important industry and earns more than its two top crops, coffee and bananas, combined.

Costa Rica has achieved a relatively high standard of living partly due to its comfortable, constant two-season climate. An average healthy Costa Rican has a life expectancy of 77.4 years. About 17.71 babies are born per 1,000 people and the fertility rate has slowly dropped to 2.17%. The death rate of Costa Rica is 4.31 per 1,000 people and correlates to the 6% of the age structure being 65 and older. The sex ratio is 1.02 males to every female. Costa Rica also achieves its high standard of living because of its expanded technology and tourism. In San Jose, colorful ranch houses are brightly painted and flowers and plants line the fences in front yards. Urban families have the advantage of living within the flow of business. They may own a bike, or a small-passenger vehicle. Of course, walking is a cheaper form of

transportation, but dangerous on the old, narrow streets. Costa Rica also stays connected to the world with 1.3 million telephones and cellular phones, and the internet. These families experience another culture just by residing in the cities. In a way, it's a mini, less-developed Des Moines. The KFC around the corner may be advertising for help. The Curves Women's Fitness Center window displays a schedule list for the week. Costa Rica may be a developing country, but it is certainly on its way to becoming a more prosperous nation.

Life in the city, however, may have its disadvantages. Because more available work is centered in urban areas, more people are moving there. In fact, 62% of the population is urbanized. Many fear the population density will grow faster than its necessary resources: food, fuel, and housing. As a result, the relatively high standard of living may drop and more deaths may occur. Tourism may also impact the availability of food because many farms only produce food for those travelers and may not keep the best crop for their family. Costa Rica has to import raw material, petroleum, and consumer goods from countries like the United States to satisfy their peoples' needs. Unfortunately, Costa Rica imports more than it exports, thus losing money in the process. Another downfall to urban and rural life in Costa Rica is the industry of human trafficking.

Men, women, and children from Costa Rica and neighboring countries are moved or trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, forced labor, or as domestic servants. Most are promised decent jobs and pay. Cocaine, heroin, cannabis or marijuana, and other illicit drugs have also plagued the streets and homes of Costa Ricans. Some come from South America; much is illegally produced, sold, and consumed in Costa Rica. Amphetamines and crack cocaine consumption have increased. These drugs affect personality, behavior, and overall community stability. Drug purchases can leave the family without efficient funds for food and health.

Population, Urbanization, and Discrimination

One important key factor to raise agricultural productivity and improve security is formulating public policy initiatives to address increasing populations, rapid urbanization, and gender or cultural discrimination. Currently, Costa Rica has not been addressing the growing populations or discrimination against the minorities. Not only do folks retire here, but tourists constantly vacation in this country. Although women are involved in the work force, they, along with indigenous citizens and those with disabilities, are the minority. These minorities that are working may not receive the same pay as normal men. World Bank President, Robert Zoellick, believes that increased biofuel production programs in the United States and Europe have elevated the demand for food. Corn prices have more than doubled in the past two years and demand for ethanol and other biofuels may raise the prices higher. Minorities will not be able to afford growing global food prices if their pay is not sufficient. Global economy impacts the status of trade.

The U.S. dollar has decreased in value from year to year, and that affects the value of the Costa Rican currency, colones. In 2003, 398.66 colones equaled a dollar. In 2007, 519.53 colones equaled a dollar. Costa Rica's total income for 2007, however, was \$45.77 billion and is growing. This indicates its economy is still thriving very well. As of 2008, Costa Rica's population growth rate, the average annual percent change in the population, is 1.3888%. This rate, positive or negative, determines the changes that the country needs to make to fulfill the necessities of its people. Rise in the population will affect the rate of urbanization, which was 3.5 percent through the years 1990 to 2006.

Even though Costa Rica has only .1% of the world's landmass, it contains 5% of the world's biodiversity. Deforestation, however, has been a trouble in the past. Forests were cut down and more carbon dioxide from burning plant life escaped into the air. Costa Rica has around ¼ of its land area in protected national parks. This is the largest percent of a country's area of protected regions in the world.

More action has been put to preserving these areas and planting more trees to help the environment from its pollutions. Nutrition in Costa Rica has been a growing issue as well.

A nutrition survey was conducted in 1996 that indicated an average Costa Rica's daily energy intake was only fulfilling 91.5% of their energy requirements, or around 1,940 calories. In 60% of those households, the energy intake was critically low, while 20% showed an apparently high energy intake. Their only main sources of energy were cane sugar, rice, and oils. The inadequate iron intake of 68.2% also caused some concern. From the years 2001-2003, however, the average calorie consumption rose to 2,850. Milk, wheat, rice, sugar and assorted oils were main sources of intake. The majority of Costa Ricans are receiving the appropriate intake of calories, but not in the right nutrients. They eat the appropriate amount of carbohydrates, but are over the level for fats and oils. As of 2007, the rate of income has increased 6.8% since 2006. This means that the average income has or may be increased and the lower-income families that need more substantial revenue will be able to live a better life.

Women in the labor force contribute 35% to the spectrum. Because the number of single mothers is increasing, most women stay at home to care for the family and household. In 2006 to 2007, 82.4% of women workers were in the service industry. Discrimination against the role of women is more of a problem in these traditional Central American nations. Costa Rica has a law that prohibits sexual harassment in educational institutes and in the workplace and the rate of inflictions has slowly degraded. Although the law does require that they should receive equal pay for equal work, in 2006, women were earning 78% of what men were making in a related field. Costa Rica's Ministry of Education did start a program for people with disabilities, and their teachers, parents and counselors. Almost two-thousand primary and secondary schools provide programs for disabled students.

Improving or resolving problems with population, urbanization, and discrimination would increase the amount of food and income by providing more rural employment and equal pay for hard workers. Crops would be more affordable at market and farmers would still make a profit on their exported goods. By providing more jobs in rural areas, the environment could be better cared for and respected. Using the natural resources of Costa Rica will also produce cheaper yields and benefit the soil of the land. By improving this factor, women and other minorities will be involved in the success of an increasing agricultural industry.

Probable Solutions to Poverty

Increased productivity and yields by small-scale subsistence family farmers would positively affect the status of population and discrimination. Not all of Costa Rica is in poverty, but those who are need to be helped. Smaller farms in Costa Rica would thrive better than a larger farm because the land quality of one area might be different from another. One area is best for growing melons. Another is only good for coffee beans. Trying to grow too many crops in one area might also be damaging to the produce and soil. Urban families will be able to pay for their food without stressing over the price. Because items at the market may be inexpensive, Costa Ricans could purchase more fruits and vegetables in addition to their main sources of nutrients, rice and beans.

To improve food security and stable incomes of an urban family in Costa Rica, more small-scale family farms should be established. Instead of growing food for only tourists, farms should have separately secured areas of crop; one for sale, one for the family. Another alternative would be to create different farms for tourism and local markets. That way, tourism is guaranteed produce, and the family is adequately fed. With proper utilities and equipment to safely grow, manufacture, and transfer goods to people, the public health will be sustained. More employment should be moved out of the city to create a better focus on agriculture. This will gradually decrease the population density and form better communities for Costa Ricans. Moving jobs to rural areas would create larger towns off the road and

attract travelers in need of gas, a freshly cut mango, a homemade craft, or beautiful view of the valley below. Urban families would benefit from working on those farms and providing service to their family. They may benefit from the availability of crops as well as the lower price of local crops. If more action was put in using the bountiful resources of Costa Rica, such as its soil, landscape, and climate, Costa Rica could export more goods, increase its agriculture industry and value, and provide better wages for its workers.

These improvements can be achieved by Costa Rica's national government, as well as by other organizations including the World Bank and UNICEF. Costa Rica's government could support its local farmers and provide them necessary land and equipment to get them started on their endeavor. But, without the help of generous organizations, like the World Bank and UNICEF, many areas of the world, including Costa Rica, would not be thriving today. If these organizations helped fund new farms or support larger businesses, their economy could start flourishing and the country could focus on its peoples' well-being, nutrition, and increased export levels. Funds for these projects come from not only the organizations, but the people who support them. Those wanting to make a difference in the world donate from their pocket.

Conclusion

Costa Rica is a flourishing little country where its citizens take pride in living to the fullest. The government of Costa Rica provides education for all, and its naturally beautiful landscape and biodiversity gives Costa Ricans a healthy atmosphere to reside in. Though tourism has greatly caused the economy to grow along with exported goods, more work has been centralized in the cities. Even though its industries are located in both rural and urban areas, Costa Rica's lavish countryside is slowly becoming drowned by growing urbanization. Deforestation and urbanization may cause the more agricultural areas to be demolished and farmers could lose crops. Vacationers and people retiring from other countries travel to Costa Rica for a more natural environment, but that bliss may slowly disappear.

Traditionally large Costa Rican families are beginning to adapt to the growing population. Fertility rates have decreased and more single mothers are running the household. The average working family is currently wealthier than others in Central America, but does not always provide the best life possible for their offspring. Women and other minorities in the workforce are not adequately paid for their services, but are gradually gaining a stronger voice for equality towards average-working men.

Forced labor, sexual exploitation, and the use of illicit drugs are a contributing cause for some families struggling to make ends meet. Food security and increasing agricultural productivity in Costa Rica can only be achieved by the help of Costa Rica's national government and global organizations determined to end world hunger.

Clearly, Costa Rica is a nation with high hopes and big accomplishments. It will remain a tourist's paradise, but only if the people are taken care of and provided with efficient necessities. An increase in Costa Rica's family and subsistence farms as well as farms used for tourism, the country will provide more affordable food to those who are struggling to survive and provide more pride to those working for that purpose.

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