



Costa Rica vs. Canada – Our Natural Areas and Tourism

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▲ Researchers study the breeding habits of fauna such as this Red and Green Tree frog at La Selva Biological Station.



▲ This little peccary walks right up to tourists at la Selva Biological Station. The opportunity to get close to nature brings in tourist dollars enabling the protection of land and further research.

Travelling Costa Rica is amazing! With all the jungles, birds and wildlife, it's not surprising that 80 per cent of Costa Rica's income is from tourism. Eco-organizations put a lot of thought into drawing in the public with eco-adventure attractions like zip-lining and canopy tours. It could be argued that this negatively affects the environment but the money brought in serves to protect more and more land, which in turn, brings in more tourists – a beneficial loop for all.

There are many spectacular sights to visit, including the Poas Volcano, which is part of the *Cordillera Volcánica Central* – a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve similar to our own Niagara Escarpment, deemed a unique environment in the world and therefore worth protecting. Another destination in the same Biosphere Reserve is the La Selva Biological Station, which protects 1,536 hectares of lowland rainforest where tourists can rent cabins and tour the park. The Organization for Tropical Studies manages this and many other

parks and preserves. They get quite creative about protecting land. They even pay farmers to protect trees on neighbouring land to provide habitat for the critically endangered Great Green Macaw. They do incredible fundraising work to protect and expand the areas they manage.

Researchers are always on the sites, studying the interactions of nature and recovery methods for endangered species. They recognize that there's money to be made while protecting nature... which allows them to protect even more. They work with non-governmental organizations and the government. Tourists, in several cases, stay with the researchers, getting to know them and seeing the work first hand.

On the other hand, our Escarpment always seems to be under threat. Funding cuts are made to our parks. Even though it's a UNESCO site and it's in the Greenbelt, citizens are constantly forced to fight against new and expanding quarries. Much could be done to make protected land more accessible. Boardwalks

through wetlands would bring in more tourists, especially birders, which would help pay to protect more land. Are you seeing a common thread here? Accessibility might also make us appreciate those areas more, and fight and donate to protect them.

Through a mix of government, public interest groups and business relationships, even Mexico has managed to protect roughly 10 per cent of its total area. Southern Ontario has only 3.8 per cent protected! The most threatened areas in Ontario, including wetlands, tall grass prairie and oak savannah are in the south of the province.

People in Costa Rica buy farmland to turn it back into jungle and create habitat. Here in southern Ontario, more homes and additions go up every year. Do we just think we have so much we can afford to waste it? Are business interests too powerful and too short-sighted to see the environmental services that natural areas offer? Are environmental groups not doing a good enough job of communicating to government

agencies and politicians? These are questions that we need to answer soon and we need to be reaching out to those in positions of power and influence. We need to be using our buying and voting power to protect what's important. We need to be active in local "green" groups and we need to donate to groups like the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) to protect the area we live in that we love so much. EBC's funding from the Ontario government has been reduced to zero.

In the meantime, if you want to be inspired by nature and beauty, visit Costa Rica. Go to support the great preservation work they're doing. Go see the lovely gardens like Wilson Botanical Gardens, (also an Organization for Tropical Studies site). Go to see the amazing beaches. Come back and inspire your friends with how much more we can do to protect our natural areas.

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