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Hamanasi Eco-Resort: Examining the Profit, Planet, and People Bottom Lines of Sustainability

—Kate Early (Editor: Nias Achorn)

Every morning I wake up in my room, a small house built among the trees, sit on my front porch, and watch the sun climb up over the ocean. After breakfast, I walk barefoot along the beach towards the Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort in Belize. As I near the resort, a boat full of scuba divers leaves the dock for a day of exploring the second largest barrier reef in the world. But I was not sent here to scuba dive with the hawksbill turtle or relax on the beach sipping a coconut, and I am not here to taste local Caribbean cuisine or visit ancient Mayan ruins. I am here to research the practices of ecotourism and sustainability as conducted at the Hamanasi eco-resort. During my research here in the summer of 2011, I learned the importance of balancing economics (profit), with the environment (planet) and society (people), the three Ps of the triple bottom line under which Hamanasi operates.

Research at the Resort and the Triple Bottom Line

My research in Belize was funded through the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) of the University of New Hampshire, which allowed me to spend nine weeks researching at Hamanasi, located in Hopkins, a rural fishing village of 2,000 people. I conducted my research in four phases. In Phase One I distributed questionnaires to guests and conducted interviews with Hamanasi employees, resulting in 34 completed guest questionnaires and 47 employee interviews. The questionnaires and interviews focused on gaining demographic and green knowledge information. During Phase Two I conducted interviews with the owners and general manager of Hamanasi, during which we discussed the planning and start-up of an eco-resort as well as current issues such as employee training, marketing, business management, and plans for future expansion or further implementation of green practices. In Phase Three I conducted a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat (SWOT) Analysis of Hamanasi, a marketing tool which examines these four categories of a business internally and externally. I also conducted a market analysis of properties that compete with Hamanasi, which included interviewing owners and general managers at five local properties in Hopkins Village and at four eco-resorts in the Cayo District of Belize. (In this article, I am not including this information.) Finally, in Phase Four I examined the green certification programs of Green Globe International and Sustainable Travel International (STI). Before leaving Belize, I helped Hamanasi write the policies and procedures for an intermediate certification from STI.



Hopkins Beach looking towards Hamanasi's dock.

Belize is an English-speaking country, which immensely facilitated my research. An old British colony, Belize only gained independence in 1981. Belize itself is a small Central American country bordering Mexico, Guatemala, and the Caribbean Sea. Approximately the same size as Massachusetts, the region is tropical, hot, and humid. A veritable melting pot, there is no average Belizean face; the ethnic backgrounds consist of Mestizo, Creole, Maya, Garifuna and more (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). Hopkins Village is located on the east coast, nestled between the Maya Mountains and the reefs of the Caribbean Sea.

Discovering the charming fishing village of Hopkins in 1995, Dave and Dana Krauskopf are now the proud founding owners of the Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort. They found the location an idyllic place to start an eco-resort and, after four years of extensive planning, saving, and construction, the dream of owning a resort came to fruition with the opening of Hamanasi in 2000. And so, with no previous hotel experience, the husband and wife team became the owners of an eco-resort.



The author with owners Dave (left) and Dana (right) Krauskopf of Hamanasi.

From the beginning, their plan was to manage an eco-resort, one that followed sustainable practices. The basic concept of sustainability is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition is provided by *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, a report commissioned by the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) examining the state of world sustainability in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development). There are three components of sustainability by which a business examines its impact: economic accountability, environmental accountability, and social accountability. These three components of responsible accounting are called “the triple bottom line.” The triple bottom line is a phrase coined in 1994 by John Elkington, the founder of SustainAbility, a strategy consultancy working to transform sustainability in the business world (*The Economist*, 2009). Most companies only measure their success from the bottom line of profit. Hamanasi strives to be environmentally and socially responsible in addition to being economically successful. The owners accomplish this by examining and acting upon the effects of all three components of the triple bottom line on the long-term performance of the resort. These areas are often referred to as the three Ps: profit, planet, and people. My research showed me how Hamanasi addresses and balances the applications of the three Ps in all areas of operation.

Profit – Finding a Balance

The first, and many argue the most important, part of the triple bottom line is generating profit. Hamanasi successfully met the challenge of becoming a profitable business by growing organically as the owners adjusted to a life of hotel management. The original business plan called for 30 rooms; however, due to financial constraints, the resort opened with just twelve. Looking back, the Krauskopfs believe this was a boon which allowed them to grow into the business. Starting small and growing incrementally into 23 rooms, they reduced the chance of bankrupting the business before profits could be realized.

As the business grows, Hamanasi remains focused on the economic side of running a successful resort. To continue to attract guests, the resort offers comfortable, spacious accommodations and grounds, gourmet meals, sea and land based tours and services for weddings and honeymoon retreats. The decision to pursue profitability before green practices most likely saved the resort, allowing them to continue operations and make numerous positive environmental and social impacts at a later time.

After ensuring profitability, the owners were able to pursue green practices to a greater degree. From the beginning, the owners felt it was important to build a resort that fit the standards of eco-tourism practices. Eco-tourism has guidelines for operation in conjunction with the environment, economy, and local people. These guidelines, as provided by The International Ecotourism Society in 2011, are:

1. Minimize impact;
2. Build with environmental and cultural awareness and respect;
3. Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts;
4. Provide direct financial benefits for conservation;
5. Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people;
6. Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.

Hamanasi took these principles into account while building the resort, implementing an environmental management policy, and developing ways to positively impact the community. By following these principles, Hamanasi has become profitable, since many sustainable practices actually help save money. These principles also allow the resort to benefit the planet and people of Belize.

Planet – The Environmental Side of Sustainability

The Krauskopfs decided from the beginning to follow the eco-tourism guidelines while building their eco-resort. Hiring a local Mennonite builder who followed Caribbean architecture styles, the owners strove to reflect green design in all facets of the property. The guest “tree houses” are an example of this philosophy. Built among the trees, these houses benefit from added privacy and shade, which reduces the need for fans or air conditioning. The decision to keep the trees is also critical to minimizing soil erosion, maintaining soil nourishment, and providing a home to birds, bats, lizards, and orchids who live on property. Inside the tree houses, the rooms are decorated with local wall hangings and hand-carved figurines, and have natural wood floors. Large, louvered windows allow natural light to filter in, reducing the need for artificial lighting.

Once the resort was sustainably built, developing and implementing a resource management policy was the next step. Hamanasi’s resource management policy concentrates on water, waste, and energy management while also focusing on reduce, reuse, recycle principles. Parts of this policy were developed along the lines of the Sustainable Tourism Education Plan (STEP), a green certification program developed by Sustainable Travel International (STI). While the resort’s policy is based on a strong model, there are still areas for improvement as outlined in my SWOT analysis. Examining the internal resource management procedures, I found many strengths and a few weaknesses.

Resource Management

Water management at Hamanasi is generally not an issue, according to the Krauskopfs, since Hopkins Village receives 130 inches of rain yearly and has only a three-month dry season. The property reduces water usage by planting mainly native plants, fixing leaks immediately, and installing on-demand water heaters and eco-smart toilets, which use half the

normal amount of water. Examining the strengths and weaknesses, a method I suggest to further improve water management is the installation of water meters, which would help the resort measure water usage each month. Measuring water consumption is an important tool for setting goals to reduce usage and to monitor changes of improvement or decline. Grey water units are another water conservation tool the resort could implement. These units utilize used water or rain water to flush toilets or water gardens.

Waste management is a challenge at Hamanasi due to the poor infrastructure of Belize. Local dumps burn garbage, releasing carbon dioxide into the air, and the nearest recycling facility is over 100 kilometers away – almost a three hour drive! Hamanasi meets this challenge by storing all garbage and recycling on property and trucking it up to Belize City once a month. A workshop located in the service village allows Hamanasi to reuse and repair many items, including windows, furniture, and service vehicles. The recycling of food scraps and reduction of packaging materials is also a key towards reducing waste. To better monitor and reduce waste produced at Hamanasi, I suggest measuring the amount of waste (trash and recyclables) leaving the property. Similar to water management methods, setting goals to reduce usage and monitoring amounts of usage over time helps Hamanasi effectively reduce the quantity of waste produced.

Energy management is the weakest of Hamanasi's resource management practices. The resort buys energy from the grid and does not operate any alternative energy resources. Most of the green practices for energy are focused on reducing the amount of energy used, and both guests and employees are encouraged to help. Compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) are installed throughout the property where artificial lighting is needed. According to Energy Star, CFL bulbs use about 75% less energy than the traditional incandescent bulb and can last at least six times longer (Energy Star, 2011). A possible investment I suggest for Hamanasi is solar panels, which could be placed on the roof for optimal sun exposure or on the ground for more protection from inclement weather. This improvement would help Hamanasi to invest in a green energy source, taking sections of the property off the grid.

Guest participation is a key piece of Hamanasi's resource management. Energy is reduced by asking guests to turn off lights, fans, air conditioning, and any other power sources in the room when not in use. They are also asked to participate in the sheet and towel reuse program, washing these items only every three days, thereby reducing energy and water usage. Guests are encouraged to recycle with bins located in the main building. At check-in, each guest is provided with a reusable water bottle that can be refilled at water stations in the room, lobby, and when on tours. This significantly reduces the waste produced by disposable plastic water bottles. To improve guest involvement, I suggest implementing a donation program to green organizations or offering guests rewards (such as a free drink) for certain amounts of green participation.

(Note: Some of the suggested improvements such as grey water systems and solar panels are still too cost prohibitive for the small Hamanasi resort to justify the investment.)

People – Human Empowerment

As an eco-resort, Hamanasi's dedication to profitability and the planet is extremely important. Profitability allows the resort to stay in business and the planet is preserved for the present and future generations of local and foreign visitors to enjoy. The third element of the triple bottom line, people, is also important and should not be forgotten. The socio-economic benefits of Hamanasi better the lives of the local employees while the socio-cultural benefits promote the conservation of local culture.

The socio-economic benefits of Hamanasi are aimed at empowering the local community. Over 90% of employees at Hamanasi are locals, living in the surrounding communities of



Sunrise drumming lesson on the beach with a local Garifuna drummer. (Photo by Demian Solano)

Hopkins, Sittee River, and Maya Centre. Employees are promoted from within whenever possible and salaries and wages paid to employees are above the industry average. These increases in skills and income have a positive induced effect on the families and villages where the employees live. In addition, in order to promote further education of employees and their families, Hamanasi has established an education fund. Hamanasi employees seeking a college education or the children of employees who need help paying for school tuition, books, or uniforms may apply for financial aid from this fund. Hamanasi believes that an economically strong and well-educated community is good for both the people and the longevity of the resort's success.

The socio-cultural benefits of Hamanasi help promote the native culture and personal well-being of the employees. Once a week, local Garifuna drummers visit the resort with their booming rhythms and lively dances. Not only does this showcase the local culture to guests, it also allows the younger generations to learn about their heritage. The Hamanasi gift shop promotes artistic works tied to the local culture by selling paintings, carvings, and other trinkets fashioned by local artists. The resort's involvement within the community extends to numerous community service activities. They are active in their support for the local humane society, initiation of coconut tree plantings, and periodic village trash clean-up campaigns. With these initiatives, Hamanasi once again demonstrates the importance of all three Ps of the triple bottom line.

Green Certification

While not all eco-resorts seek recognition for their commitment to the triple bottom line, their sustainability efforts can be acknowledged through systems of certification. Numerous organizations set standards for green certification and offer education and marketing advice for the growing number of eco-resorts worldwide. Green Globe is one such organization, providing tourism industry certification programs and marketing support for sustainable tourism. In 2010, Hamanasi became the second eco-resort to become Green Globe certified and today is one of only three resorts in Belize with the certification. Once certified, a periodic audit of the property is conducted by an outside auditor, who ensures the property still complies with green standards and is continuing improvement of green practices (Green Globe, 2011).

The Krauskopfs referred to the Sustainable Tourism Education Plan (STEP) program of Sustainable Travel International (STI) when looking to reframe their sustainable management policy. The goal of STI is to “[promote] responsible travel and ecotourism, [support] sustainable development, and [help] travelers and travel providers protect the cultures and environment they visit” (Sustainable Travel International). Part of my research at Hamanasi included evaluating the policies and procedures already conducted at Hamanasi and then upgrading or creating policies necessary to comply with the STEPs for green certification. Hamanasi had already completed the first self-assessment stage, which consisted of 27 practices the resort needed to implement. My role was to write the intermediate stage which consisted of 60 practices building from the foundation of the original requirements. Helping Hamanasi to write the policies and procedures allowed me to learn further about the green practices implemented at Hamanasi. It also gave me experience writing green policy and procedure as well as exposing me to the standards expected of eco-resorts by green certification programs.

The Future for the Author and Green Tourism

The triple bottom line of profit, planet, and people is the main operating principle which makes Hamanasi sustainable. The resort manages to balance all three Ps, allowing them to become one of the most successful eco-resorts in Belize. After eleven years of operation and numerous awards, the Krauskopfs are proud but are still looking towards the future, working to improve the resort at every opportunity. I am also looking towards the future, setting professional goals based on my research findings.

The research I conducted is important to both my professional goals and to my field of study for several reasons. I have an interest in learning about eco-tourism and sustainable practices and how these can be effectively implemented at eco-resorts or other green-minded properties. I want to pursue a career in hospitality while helping to improve and raise the standards of the industry. I believe that in order for the industry to survive and flourish, green practices need to become a mainstay, not only to meet the demands of customers but also for the continued well-being of the environment in which hotels operate. The implementation of green practices is the current trend in the hospitality industry, and I firmly believe that this is a long-term trend. Eco-tourism and sustainability practices are at the forefront of where the hospitality and tourism industry is moving.

The future of the tourism industry is dependent on nature, as visitors seek out natural settings for vacations. Visitors are willing to pay a premium for the beauty afforded by nature. However, if the industry expands without careful planning and consideration, the provision of more accommodations may destroy the very resource for which the guests are visiting. This creates a vicious cycle in which visitors travel to remote locations, the remote locations become overdeveloped, and visitors then travel away to different remote locations. In my future career, my goal is to prevent this cycle by helping locations develop sustainably while also assisting existing properties to become more environmentally sustainable.

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