A new programme to strengthen community rural tourism in Yucatan, Mexico



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Mérida, Yucatán, on September 12, 2023 - The Secretary of Tourism Development of Yucatán (SEFOTUR), UNESCO in Mexico, Airbnb, and the Union of Community Tourism Cooperatives Co'ox Mayab have launched the "Capacity Enhancement for Community Tourism in Yucatán" programme to promote a fairer distribution of tourism benefits through a community rural strategy. This scheme aims to strengthen the capacities of local communities in heritage management, sustainability, and the development of authentic tourist tours and activities.

The programme is the first of its kind in Mexico and will start in Yucatán, benefiting tourist cooperatives, collectives, and family-based grassroots enterprises directly by providing training in cultural and natural heritage, community tourism management, promotion, and the development of sustainable tourism products.



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In contrast to conventional tourism, community tourism is led and managed by local inhabitants who, through collective ownership, utilize tourism to ensure direct benefits. Therefore, not only one person or group is the author and primary beneficiary of the tours or experiences, and it is not limited to receiving tourists but also focuses on showcasing the culture and natural environment to residents.

In this community-centred approach, residents lead and manage all activities, ensuring an equitable distribution of economic benefits. Beyond attracting visitors, community tourism also enriches the lives of residents by celebrating and emphasizing their own culture and natural environment. These experiences represent immersion into the life, culture, and local heritage to encourage respect for cultural identity and align with the historical and social values of the zone.

Yucatán has a rural and community tourism wealth in its six different tourist regions. There are several cooperatives, societies, collectives, and other family-based enterprises in Maya communities with highly valued tourist products and experiences due to their authenticity and simplicity. Therefore, projects with these qualities help provide knowledge and a technical foundation to enhance their promotion and increase visits for greater benefits.

"As Co'ox Mayab, we have worked to promote solidarity and responsible tourism with local communities and the environment. Our initiative arose from a collective effort among cooperatives, academia, and civil society to create alternative forms of

tourism. Despite the achievements, marketing continues to be one of the major challenges, especially due to growing competitiveness. Thus, the importance of this collaboration is to boost our activities and improve the economy of our families and communities," remarked Mario Tuz May, President of Co'ox Mayab.



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This project follows the alliance between UNESCO and Airbnb to identify elements that enable responsible tourism schemes that facilitate an equitable distribution of benefits, with the direct participation of host communities, transitioning from entertainment tourism to one characterized by greater cooperation, mutual understanding, and intercultural dialogue.

"In Yucatán, we are very pleased to once again leverage technology as a tool for sustainable and inclusive tourism development. Utilizing digital platforms can promote and achieve decentralized tourism development for those who need it most," said Michelle Fridman Hirsch, Head of SEFOTUR.

The heart of the programme lies in practical and theoretical training sessions, covering the identification and management of cultural and natural heritage to the creation of tours and tourist activities, which Airbnb refers to as "Experiences," and the use of technologies for their promotion.



UNESCO/Juan Luis M. Acevez

"Airbnb appreciates the authentic experiences offered by Maya communities. Technological tools facilitate access to the multicultural wealth of rural community tourism, especially in indigenous communities, where visitors can learn directly from daily life. It is a form of travel that benefits travellers and host communities, creating a virtuous circle of learning and mutual enrichment," explained Alejandra Cors, Airbnb's Coordinator of Alliances.



UNESCO/Juan Luis M. Acevez

SEFOTUR and Airbnb have been working together since 2018 to promote sustainable tourism in the southeastern Mexican region. In 2021, UNESCO and the Government of Yucatán signed a collaboration agreement to promote cultural and sustainable tourism with a focus on human rights and cultural rights, through the promotion and safeguarding of cultural heritage, the diversity of cultural expressions, and responsible biodiversity management.

"Proper planning and governance that allow communities to manage their social, cultural, natural, and symbolic values enable tourism to contribute to their quality of life, and generate dignified employment opportunities, while preserving and promoting their cultural heritage," commented Andrés Morales, UNESCO Representative in Mexico.

In 2022, the collaboration between Airbnb and UNESCO Mexico has focused on promoting community rural tourism in Yucatán. The alliance is particularly interested in strengthening the role of Maya communities, heirs of a millennia-old culture. The purpose is to provide a platform that allows communities to offer authentic experiences, not only for economic benefits for these communities but also to protect Yucatán's cultural and natural heritage. This initiative aims to empower local communities to be the actual custodians and storytellers of their culture and environment.

This initiative already has three pilot projects:

Flavors of the Mayab: Discover Yucatecan cuisine in Tekit

The Ya'ax Tekit cooperative invites you to learn about and taste Yucatecan cuisine while experiencing the local lifestyle. Ana and Martha take travellers to a local market to buy essential ingredients to prepare typical regional dishes such as pollo pibil, escabeche, and sikil pak, among others. They will also learn about the diversity of plants and animals in their homes...

Magic of Maní: A journey to the heart of the Melipona tradition with Eliza

Travellers can explore the melipona bee cultivation area and, with luck, meet a queen bee and taste the rich, pure, ancestral, and medicinal melipona honey. The essence of this experience, led by contemporary Maya women, is the ancestral ceremony in the Maya language using honey elements in a natural spot invoking the four cardinal points.

From the Milpa to Tourism: Get to Know the Maya Village of Ek Balam

In the pleasant community of Ek Balam, the Unajil Ek Balam cooperative welcomes visitors to experience the daily life of the village through a walking tour of its streets and community homes. You can participate in workshops to engage in local activities such as hammock weaving, hand-made tortilla preparation, and embroidery.

These projects serve as examples of the model experiences of the programme. All participating organizations are committed to positioning Yucatán as a pioneer in community, ethical, and sustainable tourism, preserving and strengthening the authenticity of its cultural and natural treasures.

Source: UNESCO
https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-programme-strengthen-community-rural-tourism-yucatan-mexico

Discussion Questions:

To what extent can communities play a role in transforming a country's tourism industry into one that is sustainable?

Why is it important for tourism to be ethical and sustainable, and for it to involve local communities?