

Ecotourism



The tourism industry has become increasingly focused on traditional communities and cultures and the natural environmental features of countries worldwide. Mesoamerica has become a flourishing travel destination, and the Maya world has evolved as a vital niche for adventure and ecotourists. Bird watching, wildlife identification, photography, archaeology, history and culture, not to mention the more rugged inland jungle treks, are abundantly available in Maya forest. Links between specialty travel firms in the international arena and regional travel services in the Maya area are essential to the development of this market, and new destinations contribute significantly to its appeal. El Pilar is one of the latest of these destinations in the Mundo Maya. Travel to the site traverses areas not previously included in any tourism network. This makes the potential for community involvement at the outset high, but requires community investment in the process. Amigos de El Pilar provides a base for community participation in the tour enterprises destined for El Pilar. Local knowledge of the territory, its forests, agriculture, place names, oral histories, and dances are critical parts of the cultural features that enrich the tourist experience. Traditional and artistic crafts as well as foods are colorful additions to a site visit. Yet, existing community infrastructure to develop this potential is poor. Community offerings need to be integrated into the local, regional and international markets as a part of the promotion of El Pilar.

The El Pilar Program has set the stage for ecotourism with local, regional, and international promotion. Villagers working through Amigos de El Pilar in education and training workshops, lectures and tours with the schools, and through participation in the archaeological research are identifying the value of their stakehold in El Pilar. Further, the program has hosted events, such as the annual Fiesta El Pilar, that have drawn national and regional attention. Lectures and articles in Belize, Guatemala and Mexico have increased regional knowledge and appreciation of the site. Public relations information circulated to international guidebooks and posted on the World Wide Web.* Funding from international agencies, such as Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD), Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation and US Agency for International Development (USAID) has also elevated the visibility of El Pilar on the global front. These are just a few ways the development of El Pilar is being enhanced.