

## AN INTERVIEW WITH HÉCTOR CEBALLOS-LASCURÁIN, FATHER OF ECOTOURISM



*Architect Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin (center), flanked by Inkaterra explorer guides at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel.*

Since coining the term ‘Ecotourism’ in 1983, Mexican architect and environmentalist Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin is renowned across the planet he aims to conserve. Winner of the Colibrí Ecotourism Lifetime Achievement Award, his outstanding body of work includes more than 160 books and articles, and has developed his eco-friendly designs in countries such as Mexico, Dominican Republic, Spain and Egypt. On June, after an homage organized by UTEA University in Abancay, Mr. Ceballos-Lascuráin visited Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel. We had the chance to talk with him about the challenges of ecotourism and sustainability, his view on architecture, and the latest four species he added to his 4,366-bird life list.

### **In what circumstances your admiration for nature was born?**

My love for Nature was developed since my early childhood back at Parral – Chihuahua, a small mining town in Northern Mexico. We lived in a colony where the houses of the trusted employees (my father was the company’s doctor) were located at broad collective gardens with big trees surrounding an artificial lake. Many aquatic birds migrated to the lake, among ducks, herons, kingfishers and cormorants. I started observing them with a telescope given by my uncle Juan.

### **Do you recall the precise moment when the term ‘ecotourism’ emerged?**

I coined the term ‘ecotourism’ on the first days of July 1983, when I worked both as Director General of Standards and Technology at SEDUE (Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología de México) and as Founding President of PRONATURA, an influential conservationist NGO in Mexico. During those days PRONATURA was encouraging the conservation of *rias*, coastal inlets at the North of the Yucatán peninsula, which were breeding and feeding habitats for the American Flamingo. Among the reasons I stated to dissuade the building of bays at the Celestún ria, there was the increasing number of tourists – especially from the United States – that visited the area mainly for bird watching. Back then I was already convinced that these people could play a key role

on the economic growth of rural communities, creating new job opportunities and helping preserve the ecology of the area. I started using the word 'ecotourism' to describe this occurrence.

**After three decades since the term's appearance and having been interpreted according to different contexts, do you think its definition has changed?**

I think that my definition, as it has been adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), is still valid: "Ecotourism is a modality of tourism that is environmentally responsible, which consists in travelling to or visiting natural areas without disturbance, and with the purpose of enjoying, appreciating and studying the natural values (landscape, flora and fauna) of these areas, as well as any (past or current) cultural manifestation that may be found there, through a process that promotes conservation, has a low negative impact on culture and environment, a promotes an active and socioeconomically beneficial involvement of local communities."

**The COP 20 will be held in Lima on December 2014. The overarching goal at this event is reducing greenhouse gas emissions, in order to avoid global temperature increasing 2° Celsius over current levels. In what ways ecotourism can be a choice to achieve this mission?**

As it values natural vegetation and fauna, it is evident that ecotourism contributes to minimize deforestation (which is known to increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere) and other drastic changes produced by man in our natural environment.

**In many opportunities, a country's economic growth is not aligned with the conservancy of its natural and historic heritage. According to your experience, what are the main consequences of this form of development?**

Regretfully, since mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and during all the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have experienced the worst destruction of our planet's natural resources, due to man's unscrupulous lucrative eagerness and the irrational exploit of these resources. This industrial, commercial and economic development has obviously occurred in a more noticeable way in richer countries. This is how a great proportion of natural and cultural values have been irreversibly lost in these countries. Extreme consumerism has been disastrous for the environment.

**After visiting more than 80 countries, which place is closer to your views on ecotourism and sustainable development?**

It is difficult to name one place. Australia, Kenya, Costa Rica and (in some regions) Peru stand out on the management of ecotourism and sustainable development.

**What is your opinion about tourism in Peru?**

There is no doubt that Peru has one of the world's greatest potentials for ecotourism, due to its astonishing biological, cultural and landscape megadiversity. For example, Peru is second place on Earth with the largest number of bird species (1,879 species), 139 of which are endemic. We know that bird watching represents the widest and most outreached segment of ecotourism on a global scale. Only in the United States, official data show that in 2011 there were 71.8 million residents in the country who observed, fed and/or photographed birds and fauna in their natural habitat. From the 46.7 million people that specifically watched birds in their habitat, 41.1 million did it close to their place of residence, while 17.7 million travelled to practice this activity. These people spent US\$54.9 billion on wildlife observation trips (including birds), as well as gear and other related aspects in 2011. Bird watching is the most popular outdoor activity in the US, and it is even more popular than sport fishing (33.1 million people), sport hunting (13.7 million people) and golf (26.2 million people). In 2011, birdwatchers generated more than 800,000 jobs in the US, contributing with US\$11 billion on local, state and federal taxes (2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011). On the other hand, it is known that the singular

archeological patrimony constituted by Inca ruins in Peru, are an extraordinary attraction for tourists all around the world.

**From an environmental architect's standpoint, what are your views on Inkaterra's design and its conservation projects?**

Inkaterra's eco-friendly architecture is at the world's highest level. In Tambopata and Machi Picchu, architectural forms and native building materials have been successfully applied to achieve harmony with the natural environment. At Inkaterra La Casona, in Cusco, a brilliant remodeling of Spanish colonial architecture has been achieved. I am very impressed with the outstanding work on conservation that Inkaterra is developing, especially in Machu Picchu and Tambopata. It is evident that this conservationist labor is strongly based in a healthy and exemplary development of ecotourism, which can be seen in activities such as observation of native orchids, birds and Andean bears. The work that biologist Carmen Soto does at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Hotel is truly remarkable. The IV World Birding Rally organized by ITA, MINCETUR and PromPerú across the country's Nor Amazon region, was a wise choice that should be replicated throughout all regions of Peru. The idea of developing an ITA field station within the area of influence of Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel is necessary and urgent.

**During this visit to Peru, have you added a *lifer* to your 3793-bird life list?**

In my case, the number of 3793 *lifera* (bird species in their natural habitat, observed for the first time by a birdwatcher) is already out of date since 2007. I have reached a number of 4,366 *lifera*. In the last five years, I had the pleasure of adding five visits to Peru (I have been 10 times in this incomparable country) and from my 4,366-bird life list, I have registered 219 of these in Peru. On early June I was able to add 4 *lifera* to my list while bird watching at Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel's grounds and reserve, with the assistance of Braulio Puma, the skillful Inkaterra Explorer Guide.

**José Koechlin sustains that a bird migration route should be promoted by the countries that belong to the Pacific Alliance. Do you think this proposal can be beneficial?**

I think Joe's proposal is excellent. As we know, the Pacific Alliance is an initiative for regional integration created on 28 April 2011. Its purposes are political, commercial, economic and social, though an ecological component should be added. If natural resources from the world's greatest ocean creek are not adequately conserved, it is evident that the objectives proposed by the Pacific Alliance will not be achieved. There are many pelagic bird species that endure transoceanic migration routes (these are very complex and are still not well known, see [Scott A. Shaffer](#) et al, 2006), and it is urgent to develop more specialized studies and conservation projects in this geographical area, having the Pacific Alliance participate in an active way. This shall bring great benefits to the signing countries and their habitants.

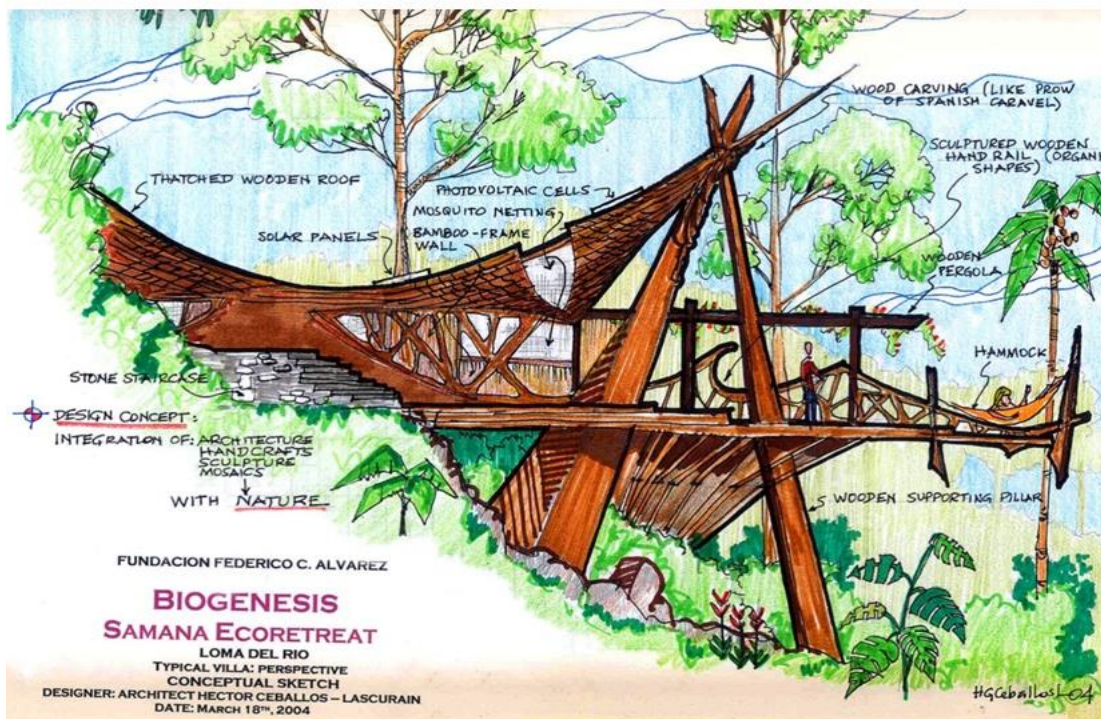
**Inkaterra's next project takes place in Cabo Blanco, in Peru's Northern coast. A technical proposal has been presented for the creation of a Marine Protected Area in the coast of Cabo Blanco. Research studies are being held by Inkaterra, as well as it promotes fishing sustainable techniques among artisanal fishermen. Sustainable activities such as marine wildlife observation, surfing and sport fishing, are being promoted in this location. How do you think marine resources should be managed? Do you believe that the creation of a Marine Reserve is a necessary measure?**

I do not know Cabo Blanco, but I am sure that Inkaterra's proposal for the creation of a marine reserve is of great importance. Ecotourism should play a key role in conservation, including the observation of fish, cetaceans and ocean birds.

**Are you working in a new publication?**

Yes, I am researching and gathering material for a publication on the world's best ecolodges, describing their aspects on environmental architecture and their standards on ecotouristic sustainability.

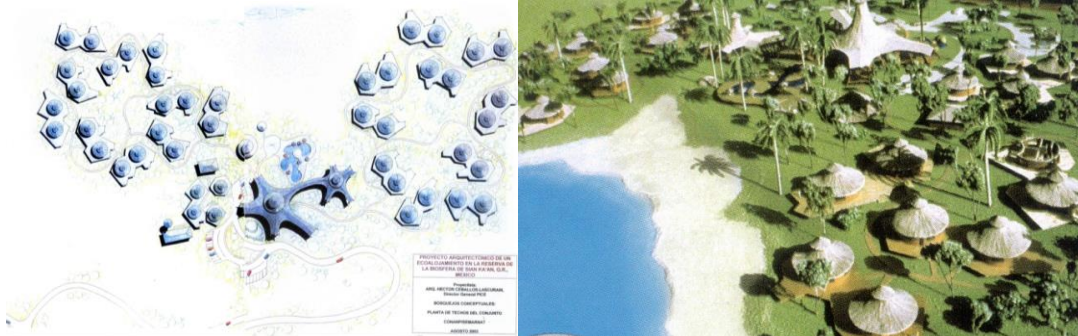
**DESIGNS BY ARCHITECT HÉCTOR CEBALLOS-LASCURÁIN**



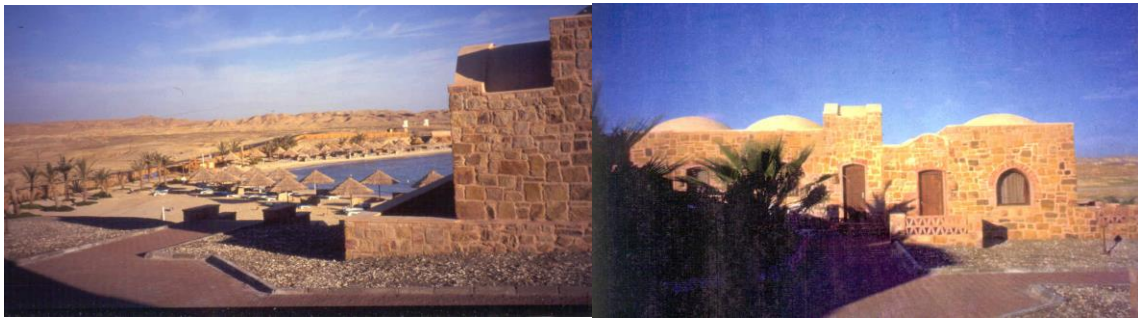
Centro Ecoturístico y de Ecoterapia. Samaná, Dominican Republic.



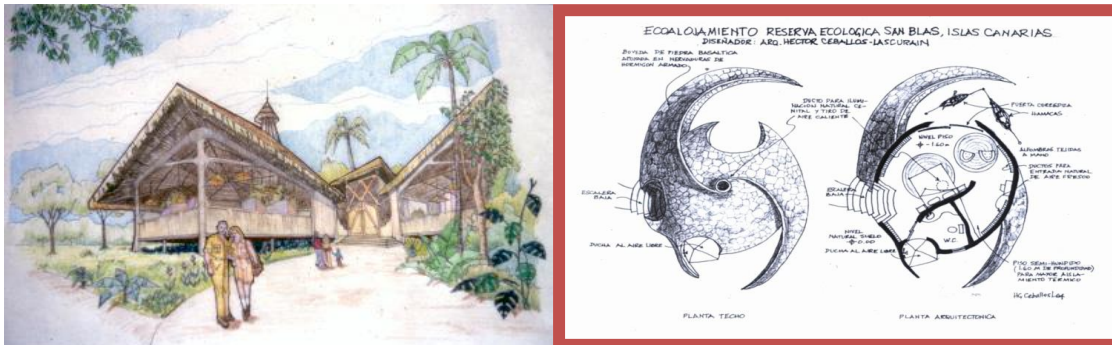
Centro Ecoturístico y Recreativo "Rancho Prieto" in Mazamitla, Jal., Mexico (2013 Project)



Ecolodge Reserva De La Biosfera Sian Ka'an, Q.R. Mexico



Quseir Movenpick Resort, Red Sea, Egypt



Left: Centro de Interpretación Punta Sur, Isla de Cozumel, Q.R. Mexico.  
Right: Ecolodge Reserva Ecológica San Blas, Islas Canarias, Spain.