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Honors Thesis

Eco-Tourism Resorts:

A Case Study of Best Practices at the Hamanasi Resort in Belize

By: Kate Early

Spring Semester, 2011

Faculty Sponsor: Professor Udo Schlenrich

Special thanks to Dana and Dave Krauskopf for allowing me to conduct my research at the Hamanasi Resort. Thanks also to the Hamanasi management and associate members for their assistance. My research on the best practices of sustainability at an eco-resort would not be possible without their hospitality.

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## **Objectives**

The objective of this research is to investigate best practice initiatives of sustainability involved in the successful development and management of Hamanasi Resort, an award winning eco-tourism resort located in Belize. Before traveling to Belize, critical definitions concerning tourism, eco-tourism, and sustainability are defined and background research into the country of Belize and the Hamanasi eco-resort is conducted. While at the eco-resort, the research is to be conducted in four phases: Phase one includes hands-on research through shadowing in different hotel departments, observation of management practices in Hamanasi, interviews conducted with employees, and questionnaires administered to guests; Phase two begins a study of the business and organizational model of Hamanasi along with an examination of the critical issues encountered during the start-up phases; Phase three is a SWOT analysis of Hamanasi and a market analysis of other properties that compete with the eco-resort; Phase four investigates eco-tourism promotions and policies in Belize and Hamanasi, and examines the different eco-certification practices. Overall this paper strives to provide the background research gathered along with plans for the proposed research to determine the best practice policies of Hamanasi, a model eco-resort.

## **Critical Definitions**

There are several critical terms that require defining before proceeding. The first umbrella term is tourism. According to Mathieson and Wall, tourism is loosely defined as “travel outside one’s normal home and workplace, the activities undertaken during the stay and the facilities created to cater for tourist needs,” cited by (Dowling & Fennell, 2003). The World

Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) works to raise awareness of travel and tourism as one of the world's largest industries. According to the WTTC, this industry supports more than 258 million jobs and generates 9.1 percent of the world GDP (WTTC, World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). Tourism is not, however a simple industry of tourists and tourism providers. It is a complex sector of the economy that needs to combine the efforts of both the public and private sectors to develop a balanced industry, meeting the needs of the economy, local and regional authorities, local communities, and business. In the past, tourism was pursued with only short-sighted goals in mind, leading to the poorly planned and developed regions such as Cancun, Mexico or Mallorca, Spain. Tourism today needs to focus on long-term growth and prosperity, balancing economics with people, culture and the environment all with the assistance of governments (WTTC, World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011).

Eco-tourism boasts hundreds of definitions without a single one which stands out as a definitive example of what the term means. The term ecotourism was first mentioned by Mexican consultant Hector Ceballos - Lascurain in the 1984 edition of *Americas Birds*. His definition first appeared in the literature in 1987 in a paper entitled "The future of ecotourismo". According to Hector Ceballos – Lascurain as cited by (Weaver D. , 2006), ecotourism is "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas." However this definition says nothing about "avoiding resource degradation, having positive impacts on the flora of fauna, optimizing economic impacts or benefits, and/or enhancing the visitors' experience or levels of satisfaction" (Weaver D. , 2006). These ideological attributes only serve to obscure rather than clarify the term. A later definition by of ecotourism David A. Fennel works to incorporate these

specifics and defines the term as a “sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented (control, benefits and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas” (Fennel, 1999).

Today eco-tourism as it applies to an eco-resort is heavily dependent upon the situational dynamics and setting upon which it is applied. Eco-tourists are often rated on a hard to soft scale and as such an eco-resort will model itself in such a fashion to attract a specific segment.

According to Weaver, hard eco-tourists have the following characteristic (Weaver D. , 2001):

1. Biocentric
2. Have a deep commitment to environmental issues
3. Believe activities should enhance resources
4. Are desirous of a deep, meaningful interaction with nature
5. Prefer small groups and few amenities

Weaver then defines soft eco-tourists with the following characteristics:

1. Anthropocentric
2. possessing a shallow commitment to environmental issues and a steady state attitude
3. desirous of only passive engagement with nature
4. preferring large groups and numerous amenities
5. these are essentially mass tourists who enjoy tangible contact with nature

Based on the target market, the management and philosophy will change as the owners decide to pursue hard or soft eco-tourists, thus changing the definition of eco-tourism at the specific

property. Location also alters the definition; an eco-resort located in Belize varies in definition from an eco-resort located in Ontario, Canada. Even within a single geographic area such as Belize, the specific location may vary from coastal, jungle, cayes, mountainous, or riverside, all of which changes the application of the eco-tourism definition.

A simple definition of eco-tourism as provided by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines the term as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES, The International Ecotourism Society, 2011). The basic principles for eco-tourism activities as outlined by TIES are similar to those outlined by authors such as (Weaver D. , 2001), (Buckley, 1994), and (Dowling & Fennell, 2003) eco-tourism principles provided by TIES (TIES, The International Ecotourism Society, 2011) are:

1. Minimize impact.
2. Build 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.

The definition for the term sustainability traces its roots back to 1980's, when for the first time the environmental movement began to rise globally, coinciding with the increase of tourists visiting natural areas. In an effort to solve the conflicts arising from tourism development and mass tourists causing adverse effects on the environment, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a report titled *Our Common Future*.

Generally referred to as “The Brundtland Report”, named after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway who chaired the report, examined the world’s critical environmental and development problems. The report concluded that long-term economic growth could only be achieved with the sustainable use of environmental resources; hence, the term “sustainable development” was coined (WCED, 1987). The report offers five basic principles of sustainability according to (Bramwell & Lane, 1993):

1. Holistic planning and strategy making
2. Preservation of essential ecological processes
3. Protection of human heritage and biodiversity
4. Development that fosters long-term productivity sustainable for future generations
5. The goal of achieving a better balance of equity among nations

Overall the basic concept of sustainability as defined by the Brundtland Report is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987).

The link between tourism and sustainability was also fostered in the late 1980’s as advocates pushed to maintain environmental integrity and successful tourism development. According to Gunn (1987: 245), “resource assets are so intimately intertwined with tourism that anything erosive to them is detrimental to tourism”. The primary concerns of sustainable tourism include biodiversity, environmental management systems, social initiatives of the indigenous communities, construction, procurement, waste management and preservation of cultural heritage (WTTC, World Travel & Tourism Council , 2010). According to GLOBE 90 (1990: 2), the goals of sustainable tourism are:

1. To develop greater awareness and understanding of the significant contributions that tourism can make to the environment and the economy.
2. To promote equity in development.
3. To improve the quality of life of the host community.
4. To provide a high quality of experience for the visitor.
5. To maintain the quality of the environment on which the foregoing objectives depend.

Ecotourism is a niche form of tourism that follows sustainable development principles. This means that ecotourism is a type of tourism and sustainability is the approach that drives this form of tourism. All true forms of ecotourism are sustainable but not all forms of tourism that follow sustainable practices are considered ecotourism. Ecotourism is the exemplary niche of tourism that follows the practices of sustainability.

### **Belize: Location and Background**

Belize is located in Central America, sharing borders with Guatemala, Mexico and a coastline with the Caribbean Sea. The country totals 8,867 square miles, which is slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts in the U.S. The country is 176 miles long at its longest point and 88 miles at its widest point along with 266 square miles of offshore islands (BTB, 2011). These islands are nestled up 174 miles long of barrier reef, the largest in the Eastern Hemisphere.

The climate is tropical making the region very hot and humid. The annual mean temperature is 79 degrees Fahrenheit with an average humidity of 85 percent tempered only by prevailing winds from the Caribbean Sea. Seawater temperatures vary from 75 to 84 degrees

Fahrenheit. The rainy or green season lasts from June to November bringing annual rainfall ranges from 50 inches in the north to 170 inches in the south; the dry season lasts from February to May (BTB, 2011). Hurricanes are prevalent in the area, the season lasting from June to November, and can cause devastating damage and coastal flooding, especially in the south. The terrain of the country consists of flat, swampy coastal plains and low mountains in the south. Current environmental issues facing Belize are deforestation, water pollution from sewage, industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, solid and sewage waste disposal. Despite these issues, the country is party to numerous international environment agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Wetlands, and Whaling (CIA, 2011).

In the past, Belize was the site of several Mayan city states until their decline at the end of the first millennium A.D. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British and Spanish fought over the region. The country offered refuge for buccaneers that preyed on Spanish treasure fleets and the Spanish wanted all of Central America to be colonized by Spain. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1798 the British claimed victory over the Spaniards at the Battle of St. George's Caye, officially establishing a British colony. The region became formally known as the colony of British Honduras in 1854. Belize gained a delayed independence in 1981, after numerous territorial disputes between the UK and Guatemala delayed the process. The border dispute is still ongoing, as Guatemala refused to recognize the new nation until 1992 (CIA, 2011).

Today, while an independent state since 1981, Belize remains part of the British Commonwealth in which the Queen of England is the nominal head of state. The official language of the country is English and the government and legal system are modeled on the Westminster system. The head of government is the Prime Minister who forms the executive

branch of the government along with the Cabinet. The legislature is represented by an elected House of Representatives and an appointed Senate; the judiciary system includes the Supreme Court and a Chief Justice and magistrate courts. Current concerns include the country's foreign debt burden and high unemployment. An active tourism industry brings money into the country, helping to alleviate these problems (CIA, 2011).

Today the extremely young population of Belize is estimated at 321,115 for July 2011 with a median age of 21 years. A 2000 census of the Belizean people was conducted to determine the ethnic and religious groups the people identified with along with the language spoken. Ethnically the region consists of mestizo 48.7%, Creole 24.9%, Maya 10.6%, Garifuna 6.1%, other 9.7%. Religiously the inhabitants are Roman Catholic 49.6%, Protestant 27%, other 14%, or none 9.4%. The primary languages Belizeans choose to speak are Spanish 46%, Creole 32.9%, Mayan dialects 8.9%, English 3.9% (official), Garifuna 3.4% (Carib), German 3.3%, other 1.4%, unknown 0.2% (CIA, 2011). While English is the official language of the country and the language in which all business is conducted, most schools also teach Spanish.

### **Historical Overview of Tourism Activity in Belize**

Tourism is a mainstay of the economy and it represents the number one foreign exchange earner in the small economy, followed by exports of marine products, citrus, cane sugar, bananas, and garments. Some threats that exist in the country that could also have a negative impact on the tourism industry include a growing involvement in the Mexican and South American drug trade and high crime rates. GDP in 2010 was US\$2.652 billion, with the services

sector comprising 54.1% of GDP. The services industry also comprises the largest percentage of the labor force at 71.7% however there is a shortage of skilled labor (CIA, 2011).

Navigating tourists to the country is often a challenge due to the underdeveloped infrastructure of Belize. The country boasts a total of 4 airports with paved runways, only one of which is long enough to accommodate trans-Atlantic flights. The number of airports with unpaved runways totals 41. Most international tourists fly into the Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport before taking a smaller plane to their destination. The roadways also make for complicated travel as only 575 kilometers of the country's total 3,007 kilometers of roadway is paved (CIA, 2011).

### **Hamanasi Eco-Resort**

The Hamanasi Adventure and Dive Resort is located in the small fishing village of Hopkins, Belize. Situated directly on the shores of the Caribbean Sea and adjacent to the Maya Mountains, Hamanasi provides an intimate boutique resort experience with the environmental benefits of sustainable practices. The property includes 21 rooms, a restaurant and bar, a freshwater infinity pool, beach access, lush gardens, full service snorkel and dive center, a gift shop of local and regional artists, rainforest and reef adventure packages, and Garifuna dancers and drummers. An eco-resort, Hamanasi manages the property following guidelines for best practices of sustainability. Some of these practices include the trio of reduce, reuse, recycle, the completion of eco-certification programs, constructing the property to preserve trees, composting food scraps, donating to local charities, and educating guests about preserving the environment.

## **Best practices of sustainability**

Best-practice is an ever-evolving methodology that for the present time is considered the most exceptional way to conduct business. Examining the best practices of sustainability at the Hamanasi eco-resort includes a multi-level analysis of the property. Their best practice, sustainable management practices extends from the property level to the local and national level. One of the first steps is planning and building a property that is sustainable in design. In the planning phase, government programs sometimes have programs or incentives that help hotels with funding to construct green properties such as Hamanasi. Property design is also important as it will help determine the methods available for water, energy, and waste management. The hiring and management of staff, the majority of whom are local at Hamanasi, is an important part of best practice management. Hiring locals generally helps the native population by providing them earnings for re-investment into their families, local and national economy. Eco-tourism certifications are also a good indicator of best practices for sustainability and Hamanasi has garnered several certifications designating them as a green property. These and other factors will be examined in the four phases of research outlined below.

### **Phase One**

#### **Departmental shadowing**

During phase one of the research, hands-on experience shadowing staff members in different departments will yield a study of Hamanasi's conduct of business, management, sustainable practices and the effect these have on the environment and local community. The different departments include front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, marketing, and tour

group operations. Recording all observations of employee practices paired with interviews will yield great insight in the best practice operations of the eco-resort.

Staff members are integral to great management practices and it is important to determine how they feel about the effects of tourism. A 2009 survey conducted by Diedrich and García-Buades interviewed residence from five coastal communities in Belize, one of which is Hopkins Village where Hamanasi is located. The survey asked residents how they felt about the impact of tourism and tried to determine if their feelings were indicators of potential destination decline. With a native population comprised of 87 percent Garifuna, the survey discovered that as a result of tourism in the Hopkins, locals have more pride in their traditional culture (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009). According to the same survey, locals strongly believe that tourism in the community has created more jobs for locals as well as improved the overall quality of life. While these results reveal a strong positive impact of the resort on the indigenous people's lives, only six percent of the surveyed individuals indicated positive environmental impacts, such as more environmental awareness, as a main impact of tourism in their community (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009). To be considered an eco-resort, it must be a top priority for the resort to maintain, improve and educate visitors about the environment. Still in the early development stages, Hamanasi and other tourism groups in the area need to be wary of the critical threshold in which local's perceptions of tourism become less positive. To prevent this occurrence, the research suggests that Hamanasi and other local tourism groups need to continue to incorporate local values, perceptions and desires into determining acceptable limits of tourism development in the area because local perceptions of tourism impact are accurate indicators of destination decline (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009).

## Questionnaires

The questionnaire administered to staff members consists of 22 questions and ideally will be conducted in one-on-one interviews lasting around 15 to 20 minutes (see figure 1). Interviews with staff members seek to examine the demographic profile of the employees, their role as a Hamanasi employee, their understanding and role of implementing the eco-resort's green initiatives, and the impact the resort has had on their culture, families, community and economic well-being. Breaking down the questions by category, questions 1-12 establish a demographic base of the employees working at Hamanasi. Questions 13-15 examine the effect working at the resort has on the employee's standard of living and culture. These questions seek to follow up on the Diedrich and García-Buades surveys, examining the impact tourism and Hamanasi has on their lives and community. Questions 16-21 ask about the employee's knowledge of the resort, training, and their role upholding Hamanasi's green initiatives. Question 22 is an opportunity to provide any feedback concerning what the resort does well and where it could improve.

The questionnaire for guests consists of 31 questions and will be placed by the housekeeping staff in each guest's room for completion on their own time (see figure 2). These questionnaires seek to establish the demographics of visitors whom visit Hamanasi and determine how important eco-tourism and green practices are to them as well as what factors influence them when choosing a lodging destination. Placing the questions into categories, questions 1-13 are demographic questions, pinpointing the target markets for the eco-resort; they also allow Hamanasi to more effectively market to the right segments. Question 14 determines the guest's reasons for choosing the resort but also reveals how important a factor is eco-tourism. Questions 15-26 are all focused around eco-tourism and sustainability, measuring the importance of these aspects to the guest and also the impact they are having upon the environment through

their travels. Question 27 is multi-faceted, asking guests to rate the interest they have in participating in a range of activities, determining the major draw for them to the area. Questions 28-30 are indicators of how satisfied guests are and whether they will become repeat customers or tell others about their experience; important indicators for Hamanasi's future. Question 31 asks for additional comments, allowing guests to communicate what they felt was done well or could be improved.

In research conducted on eco-lodge patrons in Belize, the following are common characteristics found among the guests (Kwan, Eagles, & Gebhardt, 2010): an average age between 30-49 years; the majority of visitors from the US; the majority have a college degree; the most frequent household income ranges from \$100,000 to \$149,000; total trip length averages 8 to 14 days; the average party composition is travelers with their spouse or significant other; the average guest heard about the eco-resort from the internet. A comparison between these results and those found with the questionnaire will reveal insight concerning guests at Hamanasi and whether they fit the norm of eco-tourists in Belize.

## **Phase Two**

### **Critical Issues Encountered During Start-Up**

During the start-up phase of planning, financing and construction of an eco-resort, there are numerous critical issues that the owners encounter. One of the most important issues that potential owners need to handle is the creation of a business plan. A business plan encompasses a broad range of items that all determine the future eco-resort's objectives for obtaining profit. These items include the target markets for guests, a financial plan for costs, rooms forecasts,

F&B revenue, other revenue, and marketing the specific niche markets. A business plan and financial projections are crucial since potential investors will look at these before even considering the financing of a project. Creating the business plan, it is also important to state possible problems that the hotel could encounter during start-up. Small hotels commonly face issues from competition, legal liability, backlash from the local community and the number of available and competent employees. Predicting growth is also important; the business plan should show a realistic increase in profitability from revenue and profit over time to gain investor's interest.

The initial expenditures associated with the start-up of a hotel are enormous and external investment is critical. The Hamanasi eco-resort was fortunate to begin construction on the property in 1995, well before the economic down-turn which currently makes receiving funds from banks for new hotel construction extremely difficult. According to University of New Hampshire Professor and director of the Center for Venture Research Jeffrey Sohl (Sohl, 2011), funding for new business start-ups can come from numerous locations. These can include a combination of funding from founders, angel investors, friends and family, bank financing, personal funds, government funds, or co-signing a promissory note. Once this funding is obtained, additional funding is required to pay for architecture blue-print design and construction costs. Critical issues that are important to examine during the start-up of Hamanasi are how the land was acquired, were permits or legal documents necessary, who was hired to complete construction, and where was funding acquired. Conducting an interview with Dana Krauskopf, co-owner of Hamanasi, revealed that the eco-resort was built with a piece meal strategy, requiring a smaller start-up cost (Krauskopf, 2009). Learning the rationale for this strategy of

waiting for profits before continuing construction rather than completing all sections initially will be insightful into the owners overall future plans and vision for Hamanasi.

## **Construction**

“Man, whether civilized or savage, is a child of nature – he is not the master of nature” (Carter & Dale, 1974). The Hamanasi eco-resort, aware of its place in nature, planned the construction of the property to reflect this notion. Built among a littoral forest, as many trees as possible were left standing during construction, protecting the habitat of numerous bats, lizards, orchids, local and migrating birds. The trees also prevent erosion, nourish the soil, and provide shade, which reduces cooling costs. Building an eco-resort property is more than what is constructed, but also what is left alone. On the beach, a six foot wide strip of vegetation after the high tide mark reduces erosion and minimizes silting, which chokes the reef. Over 10 acres of land on the property are set aside as a nature preserve, allowing local flora and fauna to flourish.

According to Bromberek (2009), sustainable architecture is “creating and responsible management of a healthy built environment based on ecological and resource-efficient principles: environmental, technological, financial, organizational, and social sustainability” (Bromberek, 2009). Best practice begins with sustainability in architecture which is a constantly evolving set of solutions. An important aspect of sustainable architecture as described by Bromberek is passive climate control, which is healthier and more sustainable than efforts to insulate the building and its occupants from the climate. Passive climate control is build into the architecture and design, and includes open floor plans, cross-ventilation, louvered ceilings, use of shade, ample windows, the use of local materials, water, energy and waste solutions, noise

control, and numerous other features. A detailed study into the planning and construction of the eco-resort will reveal the extent Hamanasi is able to operate as a sustainable property even without the efforts of property management.

### **Resource management**

A critical, overarching portion of the research plan is a continuous observation of Hamanasi's best practices of sustainability throughout the management of the entire property. Hamanasi will be examined to determine what solutions they employ in their efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Critical areas of concern are:

1. Energy: Management solutions include the minimization of the need for energy, increase the efficiency of energy use, and control the supply and recovery of energy where possible. Some of these principles can be implemented through the installation of CFL bulbs, no AC usage, use of natural light, and use clean energy sources.
2. Water: Simple management solutions include the capture and storage of fresh rainwater, reduced consumption, use grey water in gardens and toilets, prevention of wastage, installation of low-flow water fixtures, installation of low-flushing or composting toilets, and planting of only native and drought resistant plants.
3. Waste and Pollution: Some management solutions include reduced packaging, donation of left-over food, recycling of scraps, the use of green cleaning and maintenance chemicals, reduction use of fuel consuming vehicles, and start-up of a waste management program.

## Strategy

A strategy is “management’s action plan for running the business and conducting operations” (Thompson Jr, Strickland III, & Gamble, 2010). Crafting a strategy shows management’s commitment to pursuing a particular set of actions. The important strategy points of Hamanasi will be examined during the site visit. Four key sections of a company’s strategy are (Thompson Jr, Strickland III, & Gamble, 2010):

1. How management intends to grow the business.
2. How it will build a loyal clientele and outcompete rivals.
3. How each functional piece of the business (research and development, supply chain activities, production, sales and marketing, distribution, finance, and human resources) will be operated.
4. How performance will be boosted.

An important part of any strategy is to gain a sustainable competitive advantage which a company achieves when “an attractive number of buyers prefer its products or services over the offerings of competitors and when the basis for this is durable” (Thompson Jr, Strickland III, & Gamble, 2010). The importance of gaining a sustainable competitive advantage in tourism services is twofold; while it is important to Hamanasi that their guests prefer the Hamanasi resort services while in Belize, it is important for the tourism industry as a whole that guests begin to prefer eco-resorts, regardless of where they travel. Hamanasi therefore must create a name for themselves and maintain standards representative of eco-resorts worldwide.

There are several ways in which Hamanasi's strategic approach works to set the eco-resort apart from rivals, build strong customer loyalty, and win a sustainable competitive advantage. The first way is by developing expertise and resource strengths that give the resort competitively valuable capabilities that rivals can't easily match, copy, or trump with substitute capabilities. Hamanasi appears to recognize the value of treating staff with respect, a trait that carries over into the interactions with guests. Rated number one by the online hotel review website Trip Advisor for Hotels in Belize, the eco-resort boasts over 500 positive reviews (Trip Advisor, 2011). A common theme in many of these reviews is the quality of guest/staff interactions. Guests felt staff members were excellent, caring, attentive, took pride in their work, treated guests like family, and were able to learn guests' names during their stay. Great customer service is often indicative of a management team that respects and values their staff members. Well-trained staff members are an invaluable resource. A staff member that creates a personal interaction with a guest creates an attachment to Hamanasi and that specific staff member that cannot be replicated at another property. In addition, some staff members are PADI certified for scuba diving, allowing them to lead guests on reef excursions directly from property, rather than relying on an outside tour operator. This expertise is appreciated by guests and represents another sustainable competitive advantage.

A second possible sustainable competitive advantage held by Hamanasi is their focus on serving the special needs and tastes of buyers comprising a narrow market niche. An eco-resort, Hamanasi is able to meet the needs of soft eco-tourists looking for a sustainable vacation. Despite this designation in the tourism industry as an eco-resort, Hamanasi leads the marketing of the hotel as an "Adventure and Dive Resort in Belize". Examining the website (Hamanasi, 2011), the link for more information concerning eco-tourism is halfway down the page, preceded

by information concerning accommodations, the resort, and romance packages. If this is reflective of the guest demographics visiting Hamanasi, eco-tourism may be an ancillary reason guests choose to stay. Perhaps the driving factors for guests choosing Hamanasi are the adventures, amenities, location, etc. and the sustainability aspect is simply an added bonus that makes them feel good about their choice.

Interviews with the owners and management will help to determine the primary strategy goals and what they believe is the competitive advantage held by Hamanasi. While the expertise and resource strength is the most apparent strategy, the eco-resort has a definite niche market that they can serve. It is possible that the owners feel that they are pursuing a differentiation-based strategy to gain an advantage in the market. Other important aspects to examine Hamanasi's strategy are what actions are taken to (Thompson Jr, Strickland III, & Gamble, 2010):

1. gain room nights and market share
2. respond to changing market conditions or other external factors
3. capture emerging market opportunities and defend against external threats
4. strengthen competitiveness via strategic alliances and collaborative partnerships
5. to manage R&D, room sales, marketing, finance, and other key activities
6. strengthen competitive capabilities and correct competitive weaknesses
7. diversify the hotel's revenues and earnings.

The owners and managers responses to interview questions concerning the property's strategy are extremely important to the examination of Hamanasi as an eco-resort.

## **Organizational Structure**

While conducting research at Hamanasi, it is important to determine the organizational structure. Used to establish the lines of authority, organizational structures are important tools that compliment a hotel's strategy. A probable organizational model for the eco-resort will include functional departments for the owners, general manager, front office, housekeeping, food and beverage, maintenance, HR, accounting, marketing, and tour operators. Within this structure, the owners and management need to determine the degree of authority and independence that is exerted over each department and each employee. Centralized decision making is when all decisions are made at the top and passed down the line to employees. Advantages include tight control and fixed accountability; disadvantages include lengthy response times, no encouragement of responsibility among lower level employees, and discouragement of employees exercising any initiative. Decentralized control gives managers and employees considerable decision making latitude in their areas of responsibility. Advantages include new ideas and creative thinking, faster response times, fewer layers of management, greater employee motivation and involvement, and employees to exercising initiative; disadvantages include management's lack of total control and the risk of numerous bad decisions (Thompson Jr, Strickland III, & Gamble, 2010). Since Hamanasi's employees represent a huge asset for the eco-resort, a decentralized approach that empowers staff members and managers would fit best with the believed strategy of the property.

## **Phase Three**

### **SWOT Analysis of Hamanasi**

An important part of examining the Hamanasi eco-resort is conducting a SWOT analysis used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats the hotel faces. This marketing tool incorporates these four components into the strategic planning model, helping Hamanasi determine their position within the market while highlighting areas for development. Strengths focus on the internal characteristics of the eco-resort that give it a competitive advantage over others in the competitive set. Weaknesses are internal characteristics that place the eco-resort at a disadvantage to others in the competitive set. Opportunities are external chances to improve the business through greater sales or profit. Threats are external factors in the environment that could harm the business. This initial SWOT analysis is created from an outsider's perspective. A follow-up SWOT will be created upon the completion of the research project.

Strengths of the Hamanasi eco-resort are as follows: The location is a perfect place for guests to escape the tedium of every-day life and get-away from the norm. Located on the beach, the property has easy access to the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere, lush rainforests and ancient Mayan ruins. Hamanasi's image as an adventure and dive resort that also promotes sustainable, nature based eco-tourism is a strong pull for soft eco-tourists. The property has all the amenities, accommodations, and adventures that the typical tourist craves on vacation with the added eco-tourism side to make them feel good about their choice of hotel. Certified by Green Globe, TIES and Rainforest Alliance, this cements the eco-resort's reputation as a sustainable location. The resort also boasts professional, PADI certified staff members which

conduct scuba diving tours for guests; an outside tour operator is not necessary. Finally the size of property is small and intimate, with only 21 rooms, and the staff members are well trained and personable, creating a memorable experience for guests.

Weaknesses of the Hamanasi eco-resort are as follows: The location, while a great escape, is also a challenge to reach, requiring numerous forms of transportation through sometimes poor infrastructure. While Belize is an emerging market, for many it is still relatively unknown. A resort destination, the property most likely suffers from swings in occupancy based on seasonality.

Opportunities of the Hamanasi eco-resort are as follows: The Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport recently expanded its runway, making it long enough for international flights from Europe. This opens a new market up to Hamanasi, which they can target with various marketing strategies. The property can look to expand, creating either more rooms or preserving the land by preventing others from building. Based on the success of the Hamanasi eco-resort, the owners could build another eco-resort in Belize, creating a sister property that guests would be encouraged to visit. A third-party intermediary is also an opportunity that the resort could employ to gain market share through the internet.

Threats to the Hamanasi eco-resort are as follows: Belize is rising to the surface of many travelers consciousness, increasing the demand placed on this small country's tourism sector. Tourism is a big part of the country's economy however, without a master plan Belize could quickly become overdeveloped, destroying the very resource that this tourism sector depends upon: nature. "Going green", be it a fad or viable long-term portion of the tourism industry, is the popular demand from customers and tourism companies are moving to enter the market

generated by this demand. Hamanasi is only the second eco-resort in Belize to attain Green Globe certification but competition will increase as more eco-resorts enter the market, attracted by increasing demand from guests. Other threats include hurricanes, the depressed world economy, and the nearby drug trade problems in Mexico.

### **Hamanasi Competition Set**

The competition set for Hamanasi can be examined on a local, national, and international scale. During the research phase, a competition set will be collected from management as well as the creation of one while on-site. Possible local competitors of Hamanasi are Almond Beach Resort, Hopkins Bay Villas, Belizean Dream, and the Jaguar Reef Lodge and Spa. There are other B&B properties located in Belize but represent less competition than the initial group of hotels. Eco-resorts located in Belize that may form Hamanasi's competition set include Chaa Creek, Lamanai Outpost Lodge, Casa del Caballo. Internationally Hamanasi and Belize as a tourist destination face competition from Mexico and the Caribbean Islands.

### **Phase Four**

#### **Promotions and policies**

Policies are defined as “the plan of action adopted or pursued by government or businesses and so on whereas strategies represent the steps to achieve them” (Dowling & Fennell, 2003). Policies are created at all levels ranging from micro (site scale) to medium (regional, state, provincial) to macro (national, global) scales. On a micro scale, management

strategies that eco-resorts can employ includes manipulating infrastructure, where visitors go and what they do, by strategically placing buildings and pathways. Properties can also employ visitor management which concentrates on managing visitors by regulating numbers, group size and length of stay. Education and information is provided along with enforcement of regulations. Accreditation, codes of conduct and best practices are some voluntary strategies that ecotourism properties can employ (Dowling & Fennell, 2003). Determining how many of these practices and where they are employed is an important part of the research to be conducted. On a medium and macro level, the assistance that Hamanasi received during start-up and at present from the local or national government as an eco-resort needs to be determined. It is important to see how much Belize supports and maintains eco-tourism within its borders and whether the country has a master plan to sustain this form of sustainable tourism.

Within Belize, there are different programs that promote eco-tourism within the country. The Belize Audubon Society (BAS), founded in 1969, is the oldest conservation organization in Belize. BAS serves as Belize's foremost environmental organization working to protect natural resources while educating the public about sustainability. The organization actively seeks to "enhance the development of Belize's natural resources through protected areas management, environmental education, advocacy, community development, and research programs... which includes community development, education, advocacy, and research" (BAS, 2008). Hamanasi is one of 1,400 paying members that help support the organization.

## Certification

“Certification of sustainable tourism and ecotourism is the process of providing documented assurance that a product, service or organisation complies with a given standard” (Font, Sanabria, & Skinner, 2003). The goal of certification programs are to reduce the negative environmental and social impacts of the tourism industry, make the tourism industry accountable to stakeholders, and provide marketing benefits to tourism organizations that meet certification standards. Despite the intentions of these programs, the vast number of certification organizations puts to question the competency and validity of standards established. According to Honey, around the world there are 260 voluntary initiatives, including tourism codes of conduct, labels, awards, benchmarking, and “best practice”. Of these, 104 are eco-labeling and certification programs offering logos, seals of approval, or awards designed to signify socially and/or environmentally superior tourism practices (Honey, 2002). From the multitude of available eco-certification programs, the Hamanasi eco-resort is affiliated with three different certification programs: Rainforest Alliance, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), and Green Globe.



Rainforest Alliance is an organization that “works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer

behavior” (Rainforest Alliance, 2011). Founded in 1986, today the organization operates as a third-party appraiser that provides certification of sustainable timber, organic products and supports eco-tourism certification. Specifically in the tourism sector, The Rainforest Alliance works with hotels, restaurants, and other tourism operations through training and technical assistance; the goal is to help them improve environmental, social and economic practices. Hamanasi and The Rainforest Alliance established an alliance on June 6, 2006 to support Best Management Practices in Sustainable Tourism. The support The Rainforest Alliance provides for members working towards certification includes: training modules of one-day seminars and multi-day workshops; technical assistance creating a sustainable management plan; a verification on-site visit by an assessor to evaluate sustainable practices; and marketing benefits including the mark of approval, representation and trade shows and inclusion in promotional material.

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ecotourism. Founded in 1990, TIES claims to be the oldest and largest international ecotourism association. They have led the movement to develop ecotourism by providing guidelines and standards, training, technical assistance, research and publications. Operating through membership services, industry outreach and educational programs, TIES strives to promote and practice the principles of ecotourism by helping organizations, communities and individuals achieve these goals. The Mission of TIES is to promote ecotourism, which they define as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES, The International Ecotourism Society, 2011). They plan to achieve this mission is by creating an international network of people, industries and those involved in the tourism industry; educating tourists and tourism professionals; and by convincing the tourism industry to integrate ecotourism into operations and policies. Hamanasi is

a member of TIES, which grants them access to online resources and numerous marketing resources including Facebook and Twitter promotions, consumer-targeted initiatives, inclusion in publications and use of the TIES logo. Membership with TIES is primarily a marketing tool which costs eco-tourism operators a yearly fee.

Green Globe is an organization that provides certification, training, education and marketing services in 83 countries worldwide. Green Globe's roots trace back to the United Nations Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, a time when sustainable tourism was in its infancy. The Earth Summit was revolutionary in that 182 heads of state endorsed Agenda 21, officially recognizing environmental degradation as an effect of the consumption of non-renewable resources. Green Globe was developed to "provide a way forward for tourism organizations who were interested in measuring their environmental impact and then developing and implementing strategies to reduce those impacts" (Globe, Green Globe History, 2011) . In 1994 a membership program was developed and today programs include certification for sustainable operations, Green Globe branded tools, sustainable consulting services, and a strong marketing component for certified businesses. An important aspect of Green Globe is the global network of independent auditors provides third party inspections and validations of eco-friendly properties. A member of the Tourism Sustainability Council (TSC), Green Globe Certification meets and exceeds all of the agreed international standards for sustainable operation and management of travel and tourism when certifying businesses. Hamanasi underwent an extensive certification process to meet Green Globe Standards, which included a collection of 337 compliance indicators applied to 41 individual sustainability criteria (Globe, Green Globe Certification Standards, 2011). The only variance found in indicators is based on certification

type, geographical area and other local factors. In 2010, Hamanasi became only the second eco-resort to become Green Globe Certified in Belize.

Certification programs in the tourism sector strive to provide a credible tool for distinguishing genuinely responsible hotels or other tourism services from those marketing by green washing with terms such as “eco-“ and “sustainable” as a tool to attract customers. There is no one governing body, criteria or set of guidelines that is accepted as the authority concerning eco-tourism. Often certification programs can be signed up for with a fee but the property is never examined by a member of the organization to make sure the standards are being met. An environmental audit is an important step to ensure not just any property can sign up for certifications. In 2008 the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) was established as a set of 37 voluntary standards representing the minimum that any tourism business should follow to protect and sustain the world’s natural and cultural resources. The criteria are organized around four main themes: effective sustainability planning; maximizing social and economic benefits for the local community; enhancing cultural heritage; and reducing negative impacts to the environment (GSTC, 2009). The Rainforest Alliance, the United Nations Environment Programme and hundreds of other organizations support the standards set by GSTC, which will “certify the certifiers”. International standards for certification programs are important in helping certified businesses increase credibility while governments and consumers can better identify eco-tourism businesses that uphold their sustainable claims (Rainforest Alliance, 2011). During the site-visit to Hamanasi, it is important to determine how much the eco-resort benefits from these support programs. Is the eco-resort an active participant with training and technical assistance or did the resort only complete the process to obtain certification? Do the owner’s

believe that certification creates an added validity to Hamanasi as an eco-resort in the eyes of consumers?

## **Conclusion**

In the first phase of research conducted, the meaning of tourism, eco-tourism, and sustainability is examined, background information concerning Belize and Hamanasi is found, and a four part plan for conducting research at Hamanasi eco-resort in Belize is prepared. The performance of this background research is an important process before traveling to Hamanasi. In the next phase of the research, observation, learning, and interviews will supply critical information concerning the best practices of sustainability at the eco-resort.

**Figure 1. Hamanasi Employee Questionnaire**

Dear Hamanasi Employee,

My name is Kate Early and I am a Hospitality Management student at the University of New Hampshire in the United States. I am currently researching the best practices of sustainability at an eco-resort. This means that I have chosen Hamanasi to study and learn about all the things you do here to provide great service while taking care of the environment. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain some background information about who you are and what your role is at Hamanasi.

Sincerely,

Kate Early

**For your privacy, this questionnaire does not ask your name and will be kept confidential to the researcher (Kate Early). None of the information taken directly from this questionnaire will be shared with other staff members, managers, owners or any other**

**third party. Information will be compiled and released only as averaged responses from the entire group.**

**Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable answering a question, simply leave it blank and proceed to the next question.**

- 1) Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
- 2) What is your age?
  - a. 18-29 years old
  - b. 30-49 years old
  - c. 50-64 years old
  - d. 65 years and over
- 3) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - a. Never entered high school
  - b. Some high school
  - c. High school graduate
  - d. Some college
  - e. Trade school
  - f. College graduate
- 4) What ethnicity or culture do you most identify with?
  - a. Mestizo
  - b. Creole
  - c. Maya
  - d. Garifuna
  - e. Other (please say which) \_\_\_\_\_

5) Please identify which language you speak primarily, secondarily, etc.

1<sup>st</sup> Language:

2<sup>nd</sup> Language:

3<sup>rd</sup> Language:

- 6) What is your marital status?
  - a. Single, never married

- b.** Married
- c.** Separated
- d.** Divorced
- e.** Widowed

7) Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

8) Where do you live now? \_\_\_\_\_

9) What is your job position at Hamanasi? \_\_\_\_\_

10) How long have you worked at the Hamanasi Resort? \_\_\_\_\_

11) Does anyone in your family work at the Hamanasi Resort or in tourism? (Yes/No)

- a.** If yes, who and where?

12) Where have you worked before?

- a.** What was your previous position?

13) How much do you earn annually? (based on Belizean dollar)

- a.** Less than BZ\$15,000

- b.** BZ\$15,000 to \$24,999
- c.** BZ\$25,000 to \$49,000
- d.** BZ\$50,000 to \$74,999
- e.** BZ\$75,000 or more
- f.** Prefer not to answer

14) Has working for the Hamanasi Eco-Resort improved your standard of living? (Yes/No)

- a.** Explain in what ways?

15) Has the Hamanasi Resort changed the connection you feel for your culture? (Yes/No)

- a.** Explain in what ways? (feel more connected, less connected)

16) What are Hamanasi Resort's:

- a.** Missions?
  
- b.** Goals?
  
- c.** Values?

17) Do you partake in educational training programs concerning hospitality? (Yes/No)

- a.** If yes, how often?



Dear Hamanasi Guest,

My name is Kate Early and I am a Hospitality Management student at the University of New Hampshire in the United States. I am currently researching the best practices of sustainability at an eco-resort. This means that I have chosen Hamanasi to study and learn about all the things they do here to provide great service while taking care of the environment. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain some background information about who you are and why you have chosen to stay at Hamanasi. If you have any questions or would like to speak with me, please alert a staff member at the front desk. I am residing in Hopkins for the duration of my research this summer and will be happy to arrange a time to meet.

Sincerely,

Kate Early

**For your privacy, this questionnaire does not ask your name and will be kept confidential to the researcher (Kate Early). None of the information taken directly from this questionnaire will be shared with other guests, staff members, managers, owners or any other third party. Information will be compiled and released only as averaged responses from the entire group.**

**Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable answering a question, simply leave it blank and proceed to the next question.**

- 1) Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
- 2) What is your age?
  - a. 18-29 years old
  - b. 30-49 years old
  - c. 50-64 years old
  - d. 65 years and over
- 3) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - a. Never entered high school
  - b. Some high school
  - c. High school graduate
  - d. Some college
  - e. Trade school
  - f. College graduate

4) Please identify which language you speak primarily, secondarily, etc.

1<sup>st</sup> Language:

2<sup>nd</sup> Language:

3<sup>rd</sup> Language:

- 5) What is your marital status?
  - a. Single, never married
  - b. Married
  - c. Separated
  - d. Divorced
  - e. Widowed
- 6) What is your total household income? (based on US dollar)
  - a. Less than US\$40,000
  - b. US\$40,000 to \$59,999
  - c. US\$60,000 to \$79,999
  - d. US\$80,000 to \$99,999

- e. US\$100,000 to \$149,999
  - f. US\$150,000 or more
  - g. Prefer not to answer
- 7) Where is your primary residence? (origin of travel) \_\_\_\_\_
- 8) What is your nationality?
- a. American
  - b. Canadian
  - c. British
  - d. German
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 9) What is the composition of the party you are traveling with?
- a. alone
  - b. with friends
  - c. with family
  - d. part of tour group
  - e. with another couple
  - f. wedding party
  - g. spouse/significant other
  - h. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 10) What do you estimate is your average expenditure per day?  
(includes food, transportation, accommodations, souvenirs, others):
- 11) Trip duration
- a. 1-3 days
  - b. 4-7 days
  - c. 8-14 days
  - d. 14+ days
- 12) How many times have you previously visited Hamanasi? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Hopkins? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Belize? \_\_\_\_\_
- 13) How did you hear about Hamanasi?
- a. friends/family
  - b. newspaper/radio/tv
  - c. travel guide

- d. Trip Advisor
  - e. internet
  - f. travel agent
  - g. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 14) Why did you choose to stay at Hamanasi?
- a. location
  - b. eco-offerings
  - c. tours
  - d. amenities: (facilities, services, etc.)
  - e. wedding
  - f. anniversary
  - g. honeymoon
  - h. romantic escape
  - i. other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

15) How many eco-resorts have you stayed at before? \_\_\_\_\_

16) Do you prefer resorts that use sustainable practices? (Yes/No)

- a. Why?

**Please circle one of the following:**

17) How important is it to you that hotels you stay at recycle?

Very important	Some	Indifferent	Little importance	No importance
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	importance			
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18) How important is it to you that hotels you stay at use alternative energy?

Very important	Some importance	Indifferent	Little importance	No importance
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19) How important is it to you that hotels you stay at use green waste management practices?

Very important	Some importance	Indifferent	Little importance	No importance
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20) Are you interested in learning about the local culture?

Great interest	Some interest	Indifferent	Little interest	No interest
----------------	---------------	-------------	-----------------	-------------

21) Are you interested in learning about the history of Hopkins and Belize?

Great interest	Some interest	Indifferent	Little interest	No interest
----------------	---------------	-------------	-----------------	-------------

22) Are you interested in learning about the social and environmental issues in Belize?

Great interest	Some interest	Indifferent	Little interest	No interest
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23) What factors might influence you to choose an eco- resort over a less sustainable resort?  
(ie. cost, amenities, green practices, etc.)

24) Are you willing to pay more to stay at an eco-resort? (Yes/No)

25) List the different means of transportation that brought you to the Hamanasi Resort?  
(ie. plane, car, bus, boat, etc.)

26) Do you have any recommendations for how Hamanasi Resort could improve their sustainable practices or hotel services?

**Please check one box per activity.**

27) How interested are you about participating in the following activities:

Activity	Great interest	Some interest	Indifferent	Little interest	No interest
Observing flora/fauna/landscape					
Visiting historical sites					
Hiking					
Boat trips					
Snorkeling					
Scuba diving					
Fishing					
Relaxing on the beach					
Photography					
Day trips					
Local activities					
Bicycle riding					
Swimming					
Night life					
Birding					
Kayaking					
Drumming					
Tasting local cuisine					
Other:					

**Please circle one of the following:**

28) How satisfied are you with your trip?

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Indifferent	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
----------------	-----------	-------------	--------------	-------------------

29) Do you intend to return to Hamanasi?

Definitely	Would like to	Indifferent	Unlikely	Definitely not
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30) Would you recommend Hamanasi to friends or family?

Definitely	Possibly	Indifferent	Unlikely	Definitely not
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31) Additional comments (continue on back if desired):

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