

Opinion: Cuba could learn from Tahoe



Cuba is on the cusp of a tourism avalanche that could have environmental consequences. Photos/Julie Regan

By Julie Regan

What pops to mind when you think of Cuba? Cigars? Castro? Lake Tahoe?

While it may not seem like our high-altitude mountain lake has anything in common with the largest island nation in the Caribbean, we share the challenge of balancing a tourist-based economy with the protection of our spectacular natural environments.

Having traveled to Cuba twice in the last three years through the nonprofit Californians Building Bridges, I was struck by this compelling comparison. During my visit, I met with many officials and we engaged in a conversation around the idea of sustainable tourism. In other words, *¿Cómo se evita amar un*

lugar hasta la muerte? (How do you avoid loving a place to death?)



In some ways Cuba has not evolved as evidenced by the cars people drive.

There is no simple answer to this question. Having worked at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency for nearly 13 years, I've been on the front line in the quest to find equilibrium between nature and the community. Trying to balance environmental protection of a special place like Lake Tahoe while encouraging a healthy economy and quality of life for residents is a very difficult thing to do. Tahoe provides an excellent case study of what works and what doesn't. And Cuba is interested.

With 11 million people, including 2 million in Havana, Cuba is the largest island nation in the Caribbean and is only 90 miles from the United States. Having lived in the Florida

Keys, I was always intrigued by the “90 miles to Cuba” sign, particularly since Americans were forbidden to go there at the time. America, the land of the free, has restricted travel and trade to Cuba since Fidel Castro’s revolution of 1959. After more than 50 years since the revolution, things are changing. Under the Obama administration, travel is getting much easier and Cuba is planning to welcome a virtual tsunami of American tourists in the coming years. While the U.S. trade embargo (called the blockade in Cuba) is still in place until Congress decides to lift it, this influx of tourism is essential for Cuba’s economic revitalization because they lack the infrastructure for other business sectors to grow.

Because Tahoe is on the world stage, I’ve been fortunate in my work at TRPA to receive hundreds of international delegations. From the pyramids of Egypt where roads were covering ancient ruins for T-shirt stands to Lake Atitlan in Guatemala where sewage degrades water quality, we tell Tahoe’s story of 50 years of conservation. When visitors see the crystal clear waters of Lake Tahoe and we share how we saved Lake Tahoe from being an overdeveloped super-sized mud puddle, they are intrigued.

Sustainable tourism is so intriguing to me that I’m pursuing a doctorate in environmental science and policy at UNR. I am drawn to Cuba as the ideal research base for sustainable tourism in an environmentally conscious nation on the verge of unprecedented growth and development.



South Shore resident Julie Regan is making Cuba a focal point of her doctorate studies.

Cuba's combination of natural beauty, rich cultural history, incredible people, and phenomenal arts and music, makes it one of the most fascinating places in the world. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Russia withdrew its economic support for Cuba. Since then, tourism has been a mainstay of economic development on the island. Approximately 3.5 million tourists, mostly from Canada and Europe, visit annually.

On my last visit just a few months ago, where my UNR professor and several policy experts joined me, we noticed Cuba is stepping up to prepare for the American tourism boom. In one paladar (paladars are restaurants in people's homes), I felt I could have been on Ocean Drive in South Beach, Miami—the décor and food were stupendous. With U.S. airlines getting the green light to offer commercial flights to Cuba, (Jet Blue just

announced \$99 one-way flights to three Cuban cities from Fort Lauderdale), there is a demand for more hotel rooms, marinas, and other amenities. The trick is how to move forward with large-scale development while protecting Cuba's unique biodiversity, pristine coral reef, incredible migratory bird populations, and other natural treasures.

In Havana, I met with university professors and officials from the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment about steps the government is taking to promote nature tourism. They shared that environmental protection is written into Cuba's Constitution and that they're serious about sustainability. With Cuba closer to the U.S. than Sacramento is to Tahoe, we have an obligation to continue reaching out to our Caribbean neighbor. I'm thrilled to be part of it. *Viva Cuba!*

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