

# Lifestyle migrants bring good intentions—but major change—to Costa Rica

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A typical for sale sign for a property in the community studied in Costa Rica.  
Credit: Erin Adamson, University of Kansas

A group of Americans and Europeans has relocated to a Costa Rican community in recent decades, and despite the government cheering the economic jolt, their isolation from locals there more highlights the privilege of these migrants who drastically transform coastal villages, according to a study by a University of Kansas researcher.

"Americans and Europeans are not thought of as migrants, more like expatriates or tourists," said Erin Adamson, a doctoral candidate in sociology. "But they have a really large economic impact on the places they go."

Adamson is presenting her findings Aug. 12 at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Philadelphia.

In her research, Adamson conducted interviews with locals and two months of participant observation in a Costa Rican Caribbean coastal town identified with the pseudonym Los Reyes. She sought to give voice to the [local](#) understandings about the utopian idea of tropical beaches and rainforest there as "paradise" that they see as attracting migrants to live and work on the coast.

Instead, the process has left likely unintended consequences, including a type of gentrification when U.S. and European migrants build large housing and businesses and price out locals in places where they traditionally lived.

"The biggest influences are the land development and also the economic impact because many of the migrants are becoming employers," Adamson said. "Most of them end up opening up tourist-centered business, and the locals often experience them as the boss, even though the migrants think of themselves as someone opting out of the system back home to go live at the beach."

The flux of wealthier migrants in the community has also created a de facto racial segregation in a community that before was home mostly to black locals because the white migrants tend to build in their own housing developments and even send their children to private schools. She said the perception is interesting because most of the white migrants are likely politically liberal and see themselves as egalitarian people who want to experience another culture.

"I don't think that's what they are intending to create, but it is what is being created," Adamson said.

The locals do see some benefit to the influx of migrants as well.

"People also talk about how important lifestyle [migrants](#) are to the economy and providing jobs," Adamson said. "So they don't say all negative things."

For sociologists, studying this type of migration that has good intentions on the surface is important, she said.

"It is a kind of migration that is increasing globally," Adamson said.

"There are a lot of countries with the exact same situation going on. You can call it neo-colonialism, but it is often ignored in that sense because those governments want the foreign investment. In some ways, they will bring real material investment that can pay for nice roads and infrastructure, but the long-term impact is that local people will get pushed out over time."

Provided by University of Kansas

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