



Tourism network connects farmers & communities with Nature

By Katiana Murillo

Farmers struggling to make a living in Costa Rica's Talamanca mountain region near the border of Panama are pinning economic hopes on small-scale ecotourism, which has given them an ambitious entrepreneurial spirit and new-found environmental ethic. The Talamanca region is one of the poorest in Costa Rica, but its forests hold a wealth of biological diversity, including scores of species found nowhere else on Earth. To develop the area's potential as an ideal destination for nature lovers, 16 grassroots organizations have launched the Talamanca Ecotourism Network.

One member of the network is the indigenous organization means "artisans" in the Bribri language. The group manages a small lodge whose rustic cabins are thatched with native *suita* palm fronds and line the banks of the Yorgín River.

"We take better care of nature now than before, because we didn't know that what we have has a lot of value," explains Bernarda Morales, president of Stibraupa. One of the greatest benefits of tourism, the indigenous representative adds, is that it allows the men to stay in the community to work instead of seeking employment elsewhere. They are also able sell their produce and handicrafts to tourists, reducing the need to transport their products to the nearest market by boat.

The organization began receiving tourists, mostly foreigners, six years ago. Visitors travel from the village of Bambú to the lodge by *aynco*, or handmade canoes, and can hike through exuberant tropical moist forest, bathe in limpid river waters, learn about organic banana, cacao, plantain, and medicinal plant crops, and experience Bribri foods and customs.

Closer to Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, the Kekoldi indigenous group offers tourists a visit to one of the world's most important sites for watching the migration of raptors. The eagles, hawks and other birds of prey fly overhead during their temperate fall and spring migrations - more than million birds may fill the skies during one season. The Kekoldi also manage a nursery for endangered green iguanas, which they plan to reintroduce in nearby forests. Tourists pay \$2 to visit the nursery, and the money is reinvested in iguana management and helps support the community's elders and schoolchildren.

"The iguana is an animal that everybody hunts, and we in the community think we can do something to solve this problem," maintains Juana Sánchez, member of the Asociación Kekoldi Wak Ka Koneke, which means "Care for the Earth" in their language. The association decided to install the nursery after loss of the local cacao crops to fungus provoked intensive iguana hunting plus deforestation. Thanks to tourism, the nursery

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is now self-supporting.

Another member of the ecotourism network is the oldest farmers' association in the Talamanca: the San Miguelaña Association for Conservation and Development (ASACODE for its acronym in Spanish). The group, which has a lodge in the middle of a 356-acre, community-owned forest, has been learning how to host international groups from universities. They've developed a tour package that allows students to learn about reforestation with native species, biodiversity of the moist tropical forest, agricultural systems on rural family farms in the zone, banana cultivation, and the differences between primary forest, impacted forest, and wetlands.

"Receiving tourists is hard work," comments José Luis Zúñiga, president of ASACODE. "Learning to cook for foreigners is very different, and another clash is the language," he adds. The group expects to fill one thousand rooms annually, which is what is needed to make the ecotourism venture profitable for the group. "We see that ecotourism won't fulfill everything, but at least it will fill a gap in basic household provisions," says Zúñiga.

Others network projects are more recent ventures, like the El Yolillal Lodge of the Gandocan Small Farmers Association (APROGAN). Located in the Gandoca Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge, on Costa Rica's southern Caribbean Coast, it is the gateway to one of the most internationally important wetlands in the nation: the Gandoca lagoon, one of the few sites in Costa Rica where manatees are still found. Endangered leather-back turtles still nest on the refuge's beaches, and alligators abound in the mangroves.

Paulina Ponce of APROGAN is hopeful that ecotourism will help improve living conditions for the group's families, especially single mothers. "One shouldn't lose sight of the project's benefits for the community, not just individuals," she says.

"Group order and cohesiveness are important for working better." For community leader Aquiles Rodríguez, ecotourism is a way of raising awareness about the need to protect wildlife. "There used to be lots of crocodiles, jaguars, manatees, and peccaries," he recalls. "Many animals are no longer here, but people are trying to protect what remains."

Another ecotourism lodge ready to receive tourists as well as research groups is the Buena Vista, managed by the Talamanca Forest Conservation and Development Association (ACODEFO). The association is made up of professionals from the Bribri region, and the lodge is located on the highest point in Talamanca, with a panoramic view of the Sixaola River and the mountains of La Amistad International Park, which is shared by Costa Rica and Panama. It is also a perfect spot for watching migratory and resident birds, and the 12-kilometer hike or horseback ride through the forest from the village of Bribri to the lodge makes it an ideal site for nature and adventure lovers.

The Talamanca Ecotourism Network was launched by the Talamanca-Caribe Biological Corridor, a conservation initiative in the region, and Fundación ANAI, with support from organizations like the United Nations Development Program, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, and the Costa Rica-Canada Debt Swap Fund.

Since Talamanca's tourism activities and wildlands are so varied, ecotourism network members don't see one another as competition, but participate jointly in tourism fairs and promotional activities. According to network coordinator Géraldine Durand, about half of the region's communities are involved in tourism, whether operating lodges, providing tour services, selling crafts or produce, or sharing their customs. Their common interest, she explains, is family well-being and conservation.

As José Luis Zúñiga of ASACODE states, "The machete is not the only tool the farmer relies on. We also have to take care of our natural heritage."



Illustration by Allan Núñez ("Nano")