



**Osa Conservation Dialogues  
November 20-21, 2003**

## **Osa Conservation Dialogues**

On Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula last November 20-21, 2003, members of community organizations, conservation groups, and government ministries met to discuss three topics selected as priorities for the sustainable development of the region— one of the nation's most ecologically important areas.

Called the "Osa Conservation Dialogues," the event brought together 49 participants from small tourism projects, development associations, environmental NGOs, small farmer and forestry associations, and others. The activity was coordinated by the Rainforest Alliance and funded by the Costa Rica-USA Foundation (CR-USA). The Rainforest Alliance has long believed that sharing conservation experiences, achievements, lessons learned, and helps improve the design conservation projects and improves their probability for long-term success.

The Rainforest Alliance held dozens of meetings with stakeholders to identify three priority themes for discussion during the Osa Dialogues: rural community ecotourism projects; land tenure; and sustainable forestry management, such as the use of fallen wood, marketing, certifications, and environmental services payments.

The Osa Peninsula, located in the Southern Pacific zone of Costa Rica, holds one of the last remaining expanses of lowland tropical rainforests on the Pacific coast of Mesoamerica and its natural resources have great ecological, social, and economic value. Fifty percent of the nation's flora and fauna species are found there, but they face serious threats from deforestation and hunting. The Osa is also home to some 5000 Costa Ricans, many of them lacking jobs and opportunities.

There is hope, however, that several creative initiatives proposed for the peninsula's human inhabitants can allow them to make a living without destroying the Osa's natural-resources. Introductions to and discussions about these initiatives, as well as the problems and obstacles that must be confronted in order to maintain natural resources for the future were all part of the Osa Conservation Dialogues.

An excerpt of the dialogues follows:

### **Conservation Needs on the Osa Peninsula**

Juan José Jiménez, Coordinator of the Local Commission of the Osa Biological Corridor, began the dialogues with an inspiring talk about the greatest challenges that the Osa confronts in the conservation of its natural resources. Jiménez stressed that "Conservation in itself has no meaning, except as it relates to people," and that people warrant receiving benefits derived from conservation, as in the case of payment for environmental services that the forests people protect can provide.

Jiménez emphasized the role of the Osa as the last frontier for rural residents in Costa Rica who have been displaced from other regions of the country. He explained that after

successful and less successful initiatives developed by different organizations such as Fundación Neotrópica, INBio, Fundación TUVA, and the Ministry of the Environment and Energy, the decision was made to put the Osa Peninsula on a global plane. The challenge, he said, continues to be how best to involve residents in decision-making and develop a strategy that responds to their needs. He noted the heterogeneity of the Osa's people, many of whom immigrated to the area relatively recently and are accustomed to being employees rather than entrepreneurs. This heterogeneity, he noted, often makes it difficult to reach agreement.

The Biological Corridor initiative, which Jiménez represents, aims to maintain and reestablish forested areas that connect Corcovado with Piedras Blancas National Parks, as well as with other protected areas of the peninsula, and seeks options that will help the Osa's inhabitants improve their quality of life without negatively impacting natural resources.

### **Sustainable Tourism Opportunities**

Ecotourism is a principal economic activity emerging on the Osa Peninsula, with many community groups and families now owning and managing small lodges and restaurants. The first dialogue revolved around this theme and was led by Denia del Valle, Mesoamerican Coordinator for the Rainforest Alliance's Sustainable Tourism Division, and José Luis Zúñiga, with the community organization, San Miguel Association for Conservation and Development, which manages an ecotourism lodge in Talamanca, in the highlands of southeastern Costa Rica.

Del Valle described a new Rainforest Alliance initiative to establish a Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas that will promote tourism from an environmental, social, and economic point of view and strengthen existing ecotourism certification programs. Costa Rica's Tourism Institute (ICT), for example, manages the Certificate for Sustainable Tourism (CST), which is being promoted at the Central American level to guarantee best tourism practices. Del Valle stated that the objective of promoting certification is to help tourism projects that comply with environmentally friendly practices such as cleaner production, so that they have an opportunity to market themselves internationally with a recognized socio-environmental seal that will attract the growing number of tourists who want to travel responsibly. "Currently people do not know how to differentiate whether a site really follows environmental parameters or if it is just using a brand name strategy," she indicated. The Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas will help solve this marketing and information problem.

For his part, Zúñiga presented his group's experience with tourism. The Asociación San Migueleña de Conservación y Desarrollo (ASACODE—San Miguel Association for Conservation and Development) is a group of small producers and their families, which manages a 355-acre (144-hectare) community forest in Costa Rica's Talamanca region and an ecolodge with capacity for 29 people. ASACODE offers hikes and talks about the natural forest, tree plantation, reforestation sites with native species, and wetlands.

Zúñiga pointed out that he had converted from being a hunter to an advocate for natural resources.

**Question from Dialogue participant:** The policies of Costa Rica's Tourism Institute (ICT) and various departments at the governmental level are not coherent or consistent. Costa Rica sells an ecotourism concept but it does not practice it. Is your group going to work with governmental entities?

**Del Valle:** This happens everywhere, not just in Costa Rica. It is a challenge for the organized communities to know exactly what they want and where they are going. As part of our work with a region-wide conservation project called PROARCA, the Rainforest Alliance organized various workshops on best tourism practices in different countries. In the case of Costa Rica it has been very interesting to become acquainted with entrepreneurs and community initiatives that have been working with "picks and shovels" for some time and are now seeing some fruits, but they still have a long way to go. The important thing is that they are well unified, they know what they want, and how they are going to achieve it. They have managed to negotiate with institutions like ICT when, for example, they wanted to develop a management plan that aimed to change the entire local concept and the community would not allow it. The big answer for any process of negotiation, planning, and development is the community: a strengthened, organized community that knows where it is going and does not accept outsiders who are not familiar with the local reality.

**Participant:** How much does achieving certification cost, in terms of time and money?

**Del Valle:** The diagnostic process and the audits have no cost for the businesses because the certification program assumes them. What does have a cost is some of the changes for the implementation of best practices. There is no standardized cost or sufficient experience to determine it. We are going to work with 20 pilot projects in the Talamanca area, which with the support of different groups, will provide training in subjects such as cleaner production and marketing, with the goal of achieving certification from the Certificate for Tourism Sustainability.

**Participant:** Is there an internationally recognized seal?

**Del Valle:** Not yet.

**Participant:** After all that you have done, have you seen that income and conservation increase as a result of your work?

**Zúñiga:** What we do is have members of the group work no more than quarter-time per month. This means that they receive a wage of 40,000 to 45,000 colones [\$96 US to \$108 US ] per week. We need 1000 bed-nights per year to get ahead, we now have 400.

**Participant:** What was the experience of Talamanca after land titling?

**Zúñiga:** The people first obtained titles to fell trees and later they worked strongly with tourism trying to reverse the process.

**Participant:** How did this change occur, since having land titles accelerates deforestation?

**Zúñiga:** Things improved with regulation.

**Participant:** But conservation is with a full belly...

**Zúñiga:** An ex-employee of the banana company doesn't know how to make the land produce. One can live well with only one hectare. It's a question of education.

**Participant:** How does your group's effort contribute to the conservation of biodiversity in the area?

**Zúñiga:** Five families participate in production activities combined with conservation projects.

### **The Osa Campaign**

Manuel Ramírez of Conservation International spoke about an international fundraising campaign initiative that seeks to create a \$30 million endowment fund that will help conserve the forests of the Osa Peninsula. The campaign is promoted by The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the Costa Rica- USA Foundation, and the Osa Conservation Area of the Ministry of the Environment and Energy. The funds would be allocated for improving the protection of wildlands in the region, paying for lands owed in Piedras Blancas National Park that connect with Corcovado National Park via a biological corridor, and supporting conservation mechanisms in private hands such as environmental services and the creation of private reserves. Ramírez indicated that as part of the initiative and with the support of organizations like the National Biodiversity Institute, they are determining the sites of greatest biological importance in the corridor.

**Participant:** Which are the priority areas of the corridor?

**Ramírez:** The idea is that the corridor should focus on forested areas, including secondary forests, which serve as refuge for wildlife.

**Participant:** Are you considering conservation of marine ecosystems?

**Ramírez:** Yes, we recognize the importance of the marine ecosystems, and there will be resources for conserving offshore resources. We are focusing first on the terrestrial part because it is better known, and it is where the human populations are.

**Participant:** Is there an environmental education component?

**Ramírez:** This was not contemplated in the original design.

**Participant:** Many local organizations do not have funds and the local people are not earning anything...

**Ramírez:** One part of the project is land purchase and another is a trust to support existing areas. The purchase of lands is, in fact, the least attractive operation because of the prices. Work with the communities occurs in the corridor part. One recommendation is to give the money to the COVIRENAS, the Natural Resource Watch Committees-- to support their natural-resource protection work.

**Representative from MINAE:** Sometimes these projects don't have a lot of credibility with local people because so little of the general funds reach them. A lot goes to administrative costs. It is important that the people participate.

**Ramírez:** The important thing is to work with trained groups that in turn will work with others.

### **The Challenge of Land Tenure**

Andrea Meza, of the Centro de Derecho Ambiental y de los Recursos Naturales (CEDARENA—Environmental and Natural Resource Law Center), led a discussion on land tenure in the Osa, which the Conservation Dialogue participants clearly felt is one of the main obstacles to sound natural resource use on the peninsula. This is because many landowners with forest do not have property titles and, because they fear they may eventually lose their lands, they try to exploit the natural resources to the maximum in the short term. Some properties are located both within the Golfo Dulce Forestry Reserve and, at the same time, within lands that were distributed by the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (IDA--Agrarian Development Institute), which makes the titling problem more complex. In the Golfo Dulce Forestry Reserve only activities like investigation, training, and ecotourism are allowed. But IDA lands are intended to be farmed.

According to Meza, some 60% of the landholders in the Golfo Dulce Forestry Reserve cannot demonstrate their land possession prior to 1968, which is required in order to obtain the property title. To resolve the land tenure problem on the Osa, the communities must come up with a proposal for a concrete political solution, according to Meza.

**Participant:** Self-esteem is damaged if there is no certainty in land ownership, and this damages natural resource conservation on the Osa. Many people have very low self-esteem.

**Andrea:** We must reach the highest levels of government with with a very clear proposal that ensures the protection of the natural resources, one that isn't later declared unconstitutional. A law is needed so that people that haven't secured their land titles have rights, perhaps with a kind of concession-type property regimen. Concessions and

services can be applied to carry out activities permitted by law in the forest reserve, such as research, training, and ecotourism.

**Participant:** IDA and MINAE have ruined the inhabitants of the peninsula. They say they work for the people but here the opposite is true: They apply the law repressively and do not provide solutions. Everyone has to defend what they have here, because if they don't, no one is going to help them.

**Representative from MINAE:** A solution to the land tenure problem is being sought, but through the management of activities. For example, areas for extraction, protection, etc. There is a concern that people without land titles tend to exhaust and exploit the resource before they are relocated; but it is the local organizations that have real jurisdiction over the terrestrial-marine resources, not MINAE.

**Participant:** An entity is needed to represent the people without secure land titles, who are afraid to speak out because they have no rights.

**Participant:** The main problem on the Osa is land tenure, therefore MINAE-IDA leadership with participation from the communities would be important.

*As a result of this dialogue about land tenure, a committee was formed made up of five of the participants who are affected or are representatives of organizations of the zone, in order to negotiate with government entities in the name of all those affected. MINAE and IDA participated in the process. Also proposed was the formation of local committees in each community with a representative on the general committee who would gather their community's concerns and needs on the subject and keep the community informed. Andrea Meza of CEDARENA offered legal support to the committee.*

### **Case Study: Reforestation with Gmelina and Teak**

Isidro Salazar, of the Aserradero Centro Agrícola Cantonal de Hojanca (Hojanca Agricultural District Sawmill Center), in northwest Costa Rica, spoke of the success that the group has had with a lumber mill for a teak and gmelina furniture enterprise that sells its products in various parts of the country, including the capital city of San José. He referred to the advantages of gmelina, its different uses, and how it can be colored to simulate fine woods. Salazar indicated that there is a growing demand for gmelina because of the ban on endangered tree species. Further, he noted, gmelina's low cost compared to teak makes it an attractive raw material for the fabrication of competitively priced furnishings. In Costa Rica's northwestern Guanacaste province, many people are reforesting cattle pastures with gmelina. He suggested that in the Osa, cultivating gmelina could avoid pressure on natural forest, and its advantages as a raw material for furniture could be exploited. He also referred to the advantages of teak for construction, and how teak farms have also helped the recovery of scarlet macaw populations in other areas of Costa Rica, because these birds eat seeds of the teak tree.

**Participant:** They say that gmelina has properties that poison animals and water.

**Salazar:** That is completely false.

**Participant:** On the peninsula protests against the development of a chip mill and port facility project in the Golfo Dulce demonized Melina. People against the project made unfounded statements that the plantations would cause plagues of flies and poison animals. Squirrel monkeys are seen with gmelina on the Osa, but no other animals -- still this is better than the rice fields that were there before.

**Participant:** Why are the trees planted so close together?

**Salazar:** Plantings are dense so that the trees grow tall. Genetically modified seeds are used because of their quality. The quality of the wood depends on the management given, whether they are thinned, etc. The weight of the branches can make the wood split, so you need to take great care.

**Participant:** Can you make a living from reforestation with gmelina?

**Salazar:** It's possible. We need to demonstrate to Costa Ricans all the products that can be made with gmelina. We must eliminate the misconception that it is not useful. For example, wood that is not exploited in the south can be sold in the north where there is a large demand for making pallets.

### **Lessons Learned from a Promising, but Difficult Project**

Ricardo Bedoya and Patricia Barrantes, consultants with Fundación TUVA, spoke about how the NGO's project to exploit fallen trees had great social, environmental and economic potential but failed in the end due to lack of experience and serious administration errors. These included: lack of a marketing strategy, lack of product quality control, inadequate production time, lack of product standardization, as well as a dependency on donations that pushed aside interest in achieving the project's own economic sustainability.

According to the consultants, the project, if soundly administered, is ideal for buffer zones and forests that have usage restrictions, if soundly administered. It is also ideal for community groups, and since it deals with fallen wood, it has the advantage of qualifying for sustainable forestry certification, which is gaining more and more importance in international markets. TUVA had SmartWood certification from the Rainforest Alliance, accredited by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). As obstacles to the fallen tree project Bedoya and Barrantes cited the bureaucracy involved in obtaining forestry permits and a 700-acre (300-hectare) minimum area requirement, since the volume exploited has a direct effect on the profitability of the project. Also, mature and recovered forests are required because impacted forests that have barely begun recovery do not work -- they have minimum fallen logs available.

**Participant:** TUVA created a precedent by encouraging acquisition of permits for fallen trees. I got a permit easily. The sawmilling was done by contract and an advance

purchase helped the lumbermen buy equipment. Certification helps facilitate things because it is accepted by MINAE.

**Participant:** Indigenous people from Alto Laguna want to conserve the forest, and it would be beneficial if they would let us exploit the fallen trees, but we need to understand how.

### **Obtaining Payments for Environmental Services**

Leonardo Espinoza, of the Palmar Norte office of the Fondo Nacional de Financiamiento Forestal (FONAFIFO—National Fund for Forestry Financing), explained the requirements for receiving environmental services payments and the kind of services that Costa Rica recognizes: mitigation of greenhouse effect gases, protection of water, and protection of biodiversity and scenic beauty. The activities that, according to Espinoza, are currently recognized for receiving payments are: reforestation, which pays \$530 US per 2.5 acres for five years; forest protection, which pays \$207 US per 2.5 acres for five years; and agroforestry systems, which pays 80-cents per tree up to a maximum of 3500 trees per beneficiary. This category includes timber and non-timber trees as crops for firewood, forage, and windbreaks.

Espinoza said the priority zones for environmental services payments on the Osa are the Paso de la Danta Biological Corridor from the coastal towns of Dominical to Palmar Norte; and the Corcovado-Piedras Blancas Biological Corridor. According to Espinoza, the Osa is one of the priority regions for the Ecomercados project, financed with a \$33 million loan from the World Bank, of which \$8 million is a donation. This project aims to increase participation of indigenous communities in environmental services payments for the Osa communities of Rey Curré, Térraba and Boruca. Espinoza emphasized that there is a decree through which the Osa landowners without titles can access environmental services payments with support from the Neotrópica Foundation, which will help with the application process. Currently, he said, there are 358,000 acres (145,000 hectares) on the peninsula whose owners receive environmental service payments.

Espinoza also describe “environmental services certificates,” through which private companies voluntarily pay for the benefits they receive. Examples include hydroelectric companies and hotels. Principal services in the Osa are the protection of biodiversity and sources of water. Espinoza mentioned a survey conducted earlier on the peninsula to determine if companies were interested in paying environmental services that indicated 83% of the interviewees were willing and interested in investing in the conservation of the Osa’s forests.

**Participant:** When will the environmental services certificate program become operational on the Osa?

**Espinoza:** The program will start operations in mid-2004.

**Participant:** How much per hectare does it cost businesses to participate in the payment of environmental services?

**Espinoza:** The cost of protecting a hectare on the Osa has not yet been defined. It will be based on aspects such as the cost of the land and the minimum rural salary. Potential clients have been identified, now we will prioritize sites.

### **Opinions about the Osa Dialogues:**

**Eduviges Pomares, Natural Resource Watch Committee of Progreso, Drake:** The dialogues were very interesting: we talked about topics in which we are immersed, and the idea was to give some alternatives and solutions.

**Juan José Jiménez, Coordinator of the Local Commission of the Osa Biological Corridor:** We helped with the effort to call people to the meeting but many people who might have had a lot to say didn't come, such as those who have gmelina or who are exploiting fallen trees. More people interested in tourism came, which corresponds to reality, but there are forestry issues that have a great deal of potential that people do not understand. If four or five more people had come, this would have been excellent, but it seems to me that in general it was good. It was interesting, and there were results.

For land tenure, creating a group is a step forward, but it is still not a solution. This is very complex, and the people must participate more. Apathy is part of the reality here.

**Carlos Villalobos Chavarría, Asociación Agroecoturística Corcovado (Corcovado Agro-ecotourism Association), Biological Corridor Commission and Biosphere Reserve Commission:** The most interesting thing to me was that a committee was formed to work on the land-tenure issue. This is very important, and it is the first time that MINAE [Ministry of the Environment and Energy] has stated its willingness to cooperate.

**Daniel Pérez, vecino, Campanario:** They selected the speakers well. They were good speakers: very involved in the subject and very concise. There are times when organizers want to have someone important, so they choose a speaker who is a politician, who talks for two hours and doesn't say anything. I give the selection of speakers a ten, as well as the range of the topics. It must be pointed out that these speakers are available to help but that people facing problems are not aware of this, or they are disillusioned. There is pessimism in the Osa because things have been like this for such a long time and perhaps so many attempts have been made, so many offers to fix the situation, that now no one believes in anything.

**Francisca Fajardo, Tesoro Verde, a community tourism Project in the Osa:** All aspects of the dialogues were useful to me. This is the first time I have gone to a workshop and for me it has been very important. I am involved in land tenure issues as well as ecotourism.

**Oldemar Araya, Natural Resource Watch Committee of Los Planes:** I thought it was very good. I believe that this initiative is very important: learning about incentives, reforestation. I had one concern about gmelina, and now I understand: gmelina rather than being a foreign entity can help us reduce pressure on the forest. Workshops like these should be continued.

**Marco Hidalgo, Fundación TUVA:** It was interesting, mainly for the local people. Perhaps a little more time, and a few other topics were needed. Perhaps the questions could have been a little shorter so there would be time to address them a little more, and local residents could have had more contact with certain officials who perhaps are not so easy to access in a group.

**José Chavarría, President of the Development Board of San Juan de Sierpe:** The encounter was very good because it tried to obtain solutions for the biological corridor, which is what interests me. If there is a way of fixing the land issue, that is the best thing that can be done. It will be very good if they pay environmental rights to all the people here. I have 270 hectares [667 acres], and I have never received a cent. If there are no discussions, nothing will be fixed. This is a start for doing things. This is why I came.