

A Community-Run Ecotourism Project Protects Biodiversity and Watershed's Valuable Ecosystem Services

SGP Grantee: Fundación Pro Reserva Forestal Monte Alto (Foundation for the Monte Alto Forest Reserve)

Location: near Hojancha, Guanacaste region, Costa Rica

Ecosystem Type: watershed in tropical/subtropical moist broadleaf forest

Biodiversity Significance: species-rich area, Global 200 EcoRegion 38 (Talamancan-Isthmian Pacific Forest)

Key Themes: community protected area, ecosystem services, community tourism

SGP Contribution: \$20,000 (November 1997) and \$20,000 (April 2001)

Background

The Monte Alto Forest Reserve is a community protected area, created by local authorities and community members to restore and protect the watershed of the Nosara River. This watershed area provides critical water supplies to the city of Hojancha and surrounding communities. However, it was severely degraded from 1930-1960, and suffered from heavy erosion, which decreased the water supply. In 1992, municipal authorities and community members organized the Foundation for the Monte Alto Forest Reserve, with the goal of consolidating territory to create a forest reserve, which would be protected through educational programs and new opportunities for income generation, such as community tourism. The Foundation created a means by which land could be donated to the reserve, which was legally established in 1994. Local support for the Foundation was critical to achieving this, and the reserve is co-managed by the Foundation, the municipality, and the National Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE).

Project Implementation

Beginning in 1993, the Foundation undertook educational programs to help community members learn more environmentally friendly farming techniques and establish new micro-enterprises to increase income generation. In 1997, SGP provided support to the Foundation to initiate a community tourism project related to the forest reserve. To make tourism possible, basic infrastructure was necessary, including access roads, a guest house, eating facilities, an information center, and a museum. In addition, community members were trained to lead tours and guard the reserve, prepare food, interact with guests and manage the overall tourism enterprise. While a comprehensive marketing plan still remains to be implemented, as of September 2003 2,500 tourists had visited the Monte Alto Forest Reserve. The income from this tourism helps the Foundation maintain its efforts to protect the forest, and therefore its water filtration services, and also has made it possible to continue the Foundation's other educational programs.

Results

The project has had a measurable impact on local biodiversity as well as local incomes and livelihoods. Species that had disappeared several decades ago have now been seen again in the region. Researchers and students who have studied the region have found several new plant species, and recently assessed the biological diversity of the Monte Alto Reserve, finding 157 bird species, 158 trees, 67 orchids, over 200 butterflies and moths, and a range of other plant and animal species. All of these are now protected thanks to the Foundation's educational and community tourism efforts. In terms of livelihoods, agricultural micro-enterprises are have created at least 50 new jobs, and the Foundation employs 10 people as guides, park guards, administrators, and cooks as part of the community tourism efforts. Finally, 1200 families benefit from the Foundation through access to drinking water that is naturally filtered in the restored watershed.

Partnerships

In addition to the GEF Small Grants Programme, local, national and international partners have played key roles. In addition to supporting the Foundation financially, SGP in Costa Rica has organized a network of community-run tourism projects and has funded a broad effort to provide technical assistance in management and marketing. The Foundation created strategic alliances with Costa Rican government agencies, such as MINAE and the Ministry of Agriculture, and also with other non-governmental organizations, including Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, cooperatives of coffee growers, agricultural associations, and more. The project received Costa Rica's Healthy Community Prize in 1998, and in 2004, it was named a finalist for the United Nations Development Programme's Equator Prize.