



**PROJECT REPORT
COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP
DECEMBER 2 – 10, 2017**

Executive Summary



Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led its first volunteer trip to the Osa Peninsula in the southwest corner of Costa Rica, in December 2017. The 15 Conservation VIP® volunteers included three ConservationVIP® Board members and Trip Leaders Carol Clark, Mark Hardgrove and Kelly McCoy. The group was assisted by Marco Fallas, a local guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours and Aida Garcia from the Corcovado Foundation.

The goal for the Costa Rica volunteer project was to protect the sea turtles that nest on the beaches of the Osa Peninsula. The project work consisted of late night and early morning beach patrols to locate, excavate, and relocate sea turtle nests to a protected turtle hatchery. The sea turtle projects were carried out under the auspices of the Corcovado Foundation Sea Turtle Conservation Program, a local nonprofit founded in 2006 to protect sea turtles and their nesting beaches in the Drake Bay area of the Osa Peninsula. The ConservationVIP® volunteers contributed 405 hours of volunteer hours in sea turtle patrols including training, and beach and trail clean-up. Trip Leaders, Carol Clark and Mark Hardgrove also met with the local community organization, Asociación Conservacionista para la Protección del la Tortuga Marina del Progreso (ACOTPRO). This small community organization (<http://www.Drakebayturtles.org>) was created to “unite and empower the local conservationists working to protect the sea turtles nesting in Drake Bay.” The purpose of the meeting was to clarify ConservationVIP’s mission, lodging requirements and work goals and how they related to utilizing the Corcovado Foundation Sea Turtle Program and the Drake Bay Backpackers Hostel.

Detailed Trip Report

Day 1.

On Saturday, December 2, Trip Leaders Carol Clark, Mark Hardgrove, and Kelly McCoy met the other 12 volunteers at the Radisson Park Inn hotel in San José, Costa Rica. The group met for a detailed orientation and safety briefing. After the meeting, the group was introduced to local guide, Marco “Tex” Fallas from Costa Rica Sun Tours. Marco provided an enthusiastic and energetic presentation of activities to come and provided a map of Costa Rica to each volunteer. After the presentations, the group ate dinner at the hotel and then headed to their rooms to prepare for the next day departure.



Marco and Warren loading the bus with luggage on top

Day 2.

On Sunday, December 3, after breakfast in the hotel, the group boarded the bus for the journey to the volunteer project location, on the Osa Peninsula. During the drive Marco

provided information on the history of the areas on the route. The group stopped briefly in Cartago, at the Basilica de Nuestra Senora del los Angeles (Our Lady of the Angels Basilica), then reached Cerro de la Muerte around 11:00am where the group had a guided hike in the highland oak forests. Below are pictures of Marco Fallas' introduction to Cerro de la Muerte at the beginning of the hike, and just a few of the many species of Hummingbirds the group saw along the way.



The starting elevation was around 9,500 feet so the group covered the first uphill portion at a slow pace. During the two-hour hike in the highland oak forest, Marco pointed out hummingbirds, a variety of vegetation, trees and history. The trail was medium to narrow and was wet and muddy in some spots, dry in others. The group brought trash bags on the hike intending to pick up trash along the hike. However, they were pleased to find the trail was very clean so very little was picked up. The hike ended at a local home which served a delightful typical Costa Rican lunch. The group was treated to a dish of organic shiitake mushrooms and after the meal enjoyed a short demonstration on how shiitake mushrooms are grown on this farm and produced for the growing organic food markets.





After lunch, the group proceeded by bus to the overnight accommodation at Talari Lodge in San Isidro del General. Close to the lodge a Crested Caracara was spotted.

After dinner that evening, volunteers repacked so they could send some gear back to San José with Marco and minimize the amount of gear transported to Drakes Bay Backpackers hostel for the turtle patrols.

Day 3.

Monday, December 4: The morning started with an optional 6:00 am birdwatching activity lead by Marco. In the morning, the birds are active right in front of the lodge so there was minimal walking to see Toucans, Quetzal, and a variety of humming birds.



After the 7:00 am breakfast, the group continued by bus to the Sierpe River where the luggage was unloaded from the bus top, and loaded onto the boat to Drake Bay.



Photos of volunteer guests Nikki Kelly, and Sun Tours Guide Marco Fallas.

The boat captain, Alex, balanced out the weight of the volunteers in the boat to safely seat everyone. The boat ride on the Sierpe River and Pacific Ocean was about 1.5 hours long and showcased views of the mangroves and wildlife. Along the way, Alex pointed out crocodiles, Caiman, and a magnificent mangrove tree area where he explained how the different mangrove seeds propagate. Merging from the River to the Pacific Ocean waters is fantastic, changing from the brackish waters to deep blue.



At the end of the boat ride, the group met Aida Garcia, the host and guide for the Corcovado Foundation at the Drake Bay Backpacker hostel. The luggage and volunteers squeezed onto a very small old bus for the final leg of the journey to Osa Peninsula, a 25-minute ride through town, on dirt roads and through streams of water to El Progresso.

In the afternoon, Aida provided an orientation about the Corcovado Foundation and a working lecture about the sea turtles project. After dinner, the volunteers watched an hour - long video on Plastics in the Oceans which horrifically emphasizes the world-wide problem and explained why ConservationVIP® carries trash bags on all our walks.



Day 4.

Tuesday, December 5: After an early morning breakfast, the group walked to the beach to further prepare for the first turtle project, following Aida to ensure safe passage by the active local airstrip.



At the beach hut, by the turtle nursery, Aida introduced the volunteers to Johnson, a representative from ACOTPRO, who told the group about the local community efforts to protect the turtles and about the nursery. Aida provided the group with 1.5 hours of discussion and training on how the turtles nest, where they nest, what to look for with tracks, how the eggs are dug and relocated. The group returned to the hostel for lunch

In the evening, the volunteers returned to the beach, meeting with Edin from ACTOPRO and his assistants. Quietly, without flashlights, the group observed as 87 Olive Ridley hatchlings were released on the beach for their fledging journey to the sea. Afterwards, the volunteers were split into two groups which worked with Aida and Edin, surveying the beach above the tideline for evidence of turtle tracks and nesting indications. The volunteers spotted tracks of a River turtle but saw no signs of sea turtle tracks. Following the beach patrols, the volunteers returned to the hostel, arriving "home" around 10:30 P.M.

Day 5.

After breakfast on Wednesday, December 6, the morning starts with a bus ride up to the foot of a nearby waterfall. The ride along the way accentuates the variety of lush forests, small villages and abundant farming opportunities.



Leaf cutter ants



Picking up trash on beach

After the walk to the waterfall, the group met the bus driver for a short ride to a beach area where the river and the Pacific Ocean meet. Along the trail to the beach and on the beach, the group collected trash, hiking back to the hostel for lunch. Unfortunately, after resting for the afternoon's work project, at the last moment the volunteers were notified that the planned excavation activity had been cancelled. Noting that many of the volunteers (as well as the leaders) were still heated and tired from the morning the group spent the afternoon watching two training movies relating to the environment.

In the evening, the volunteer group headed back to the beach for night patrol. The group quietly observed as the ACOTPRO volunteers released 38 hatchlings and then Aida lead the group through the pitch-black evening. She showed the volunteers how to adjust their eyes to see the dark tracks of the nesting turtles. The volunteers were keen to see some but as this was the end of the season, they were few and far between in this area. The stars were fantastic and the sky was clear as the volunteers walked back across the suspension bridge to the airstrip and then boarded the bus back to the hostel, arriving around 10:30 pm.



Day 6.

Thursday, December 7, after breakfast the volunteers took the bus into town where Aida and Carlos led a hike from Drake Bay to Aguitas/Rincon. The introductory tour exposed the volunteers to a variety of plant and bird life, further explaining the diversity of this peninsula. On the way the volunteers saw a monkey, macaw and a variety of plants and trees.

In the evening, heavy rain started right around 6:00pm so the group stayed in for the night, reading, lying in the hammocks and quietly talking.



Day 7.

Friday, December 8 started with a wake-up call at 4:00 am for a 4:30am walk to the beach for Censo (the turtle census), morning patrol and data entry. The volunteer group watched as 53 hatchlings were released by volunteers from ACOTPRO. The volunteers observed a Crested Caracara swoop down and snatch what was probably a crab or perhaps a hatchling in its talons before flying back to its roost. On the morning survey walk, the volunteers checked to see if any turtles came to nest after the evening patrol. The volunteers did not see tracks. Along the way volunteers picked up eight 33-gallon trash bags of washed up debris.



The volunteers returned to the hostel for breakfast and clean up and rest until 9:30am when the group was planning to help the community sand, scrape and paint the ironwork for a bridge over the Drake River. But a few minutes before the volunteers were scheduled to leave, the sky opened and it began to thunder and a steady hard rain began. Since the work site was not covered and the work involved use of electrical tools, unfortunately this service project was cancelled.



Mid-afternoon, the volunteers walked back to the beach to learn about the turtle excavation process. Volunteers with ACOTPRO and Aida demonstrated how the hatched eggs are excavated from the nest in the nursery, separated and counted as either being viable, did not fully hatch or died and how the data is recorded and then released to the government.



Volunteers watched four Olive Ridley turtles being released and then continued cleaning the beach. This last day on this beach, the volunteers sat and watched the sunset before heading back for dinner.





Day 8.

Saturday, December 9: The group packed up and said goodbyes to the staff at the Drake Bay Backpackers hostel. The volunteers were particularly generous and left extra gear, spare clothing and even boots for this remote community. The bus transported the volunteers in the pouring rain to the tiny Nature Air "terminal". Because the plane only had 12 seats, two flights were needed to transport the group to San José. Despite the rain and wind, the flight was relatively calm.

The volunteers had a late lunch at La Posada De Las Brujas before battling the traffic to the Don Carlos Hotel in San José. The group's final dinner was at the Machu Picchu restaurant where the volunteers feasted on typical Peruvian food and toasted to a successful first ConservationVIP® trip to Costa Rica. Back at the hotel the volunteers bid goodbye to their wonderful guide Marco and steadfast and safe driver, Warner.



Day 9.

Sunday, December 10, a few volunteers caught their bus to the airport in the wee hours of the night/morning. The Costa Rica Volunteer trip officially ended after breakfast. Some choose to stay an additional night or two to continue discovering more of the charm of Costa Rica.

Summary and General Comments

The goal for the Costa Rica Volunteer project was to protect the sea turtles that nest on the beaches in the Osa Peninsula. Since this was the inaugural trip to Costa Rica for ConservationVIP®, goals for this trip also included verifying locations, partnerships and project work. Some of the planned project work was not initiated or was not completed because of the weather or scheduling, but the goals of this trip can certainly be marked as successful.

The weather was mostly sunny, very humid and with some periods of heavy rain during our work days. The temperatures were also good and were in the mid to upper 80's in the day time and upper 70's at night. Rain gear was required at times and trails were often muddy and slick. One work project had to be cancelled because of the heavy rain.

Because this was an inaugural trip, the invited participants were restricted to prior ConservationVIP® volunteers. As expected from experienced volunteers, they were very congenial, they worked well together, they dealt well with the challenges of a new trip, and they were generous in sharing their valuable suggestions about how Conservation VIP® can improve the trip for future groups. ConservationVIP® wishes to offer special thanks to the Costa Rica Sun Tours' guide, Marco Fallas, to the local Drake Bay volunteers, and especially to Aida Garcia of the Corcovado Foundation.

On this inaugural Costa Rica Volunteer Trip, a total of 405 hours of volunteer hours were completed in training, sea turtle patrols, and beach and trail clean-up:

213 Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings were released.

14 bags (33 gallon) of trash was collected during beach and trail walks.

Volunteers and Trip Leaders hiked/walked approximately 53 miles over the course of trip.

Pura Vida!

