



## PROJECT REPORT COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP SEPTEMBER 11 – 20, 2018



### Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led its first volunteer trip to Punta Banco in the southwest corner of Costa Rica, in September 2018. The 13 Conservation VIP® volunteers included two ConservationVIP® Board members, Trip Leaders Carol Clark and Kelly McCoy. The group was assisted by local partners Marco Fallas, Guide and Fernando Sanchez, Driver and Assistant Guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, Stephanie Joseph, Volunteer Coordinator from ProParques, and Wilberth Vargas Guerrero and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez from Proyecto Conservación Tortugas (Punta Banco Community Association).

There were three main projects for volunteer work in the Central and South Pacific areas of Costa Rica. The first project, as the group drove south, was to support ProParques, a non-profit and public utility organization, with maintenance and sustainability projects at two Costa Rican National Parks: Parque Nacional Carara and Parque Nacional Marino Ballena along the central Pacific Coast. At the two parks, ConservationVIP® volunteers donated 97 hours of work that consisted of a short orientation, briefing on tool safety, 800 meters of trail maintenance, and 3.7 meters of fence removal and fence building.

The trip's primary work goal, the group's second project, was to aid in protecting the sea turtles that nest on the south Pacific Coast beaches of Punta Banco. These community projects were carried out under the auspices of the Proyecto Conservación Tortugas (Punta Banco Community Association), a local nonprofit community organization founded in 2004 to "improve the conservation conditions of sea turtles that inhabit and nest along the coastline of the Osa canton, particularly at Punta Banco beach." ConservationVIP® volunteers worked in this area from the early evening of September 13th until the morning of September 18th and contributed 374 hours of volunteer work. Work in Punta Banco included building a natural sea barrier in front of a sea turtle nesting to stave off the eroding coastline, planting palm trees, early morning and late evening sea turtle patrols to find and protect nesting turtles and the hatchery, releasing hatchlings, exhuming hatched eggs to determine survival rates, data collection to share with the community and the national sea turtle data bases, beach clean-up and initial restoration work on an additional turtle hatchery. The group also participated in beach and trail clean-up along the sea turtle nesting beaches, wildlife counting and recording at Tiskita Nature Reserve, contributing to the community and national data bases.

The third volunteer work project occurred as the group traveled back north towards San José. The main purpose of this project was to contribute to the protection and sustainability of the rare Quetzal bird in Parque Nacional Los Quetzales on Cerro de la Muerte. ConservationVIP® volunteers contributed 52 hours of work though moving downed Alderwood trees, building nests, sighting Quetzals, and initial transport of the artificial nests to Quetzal nesting sites within the area.

### **Detailed Trip Report**

On September 11, Trip Leaders Carol Clark and Kelly McCoy met the other 11 volunteers at the Hotel La Rosa de America in San José, Costa Rica for a detailed orientation and safety information briefing. Local guide, Marco "Tex" Fallas from Costa Rica Sun Tours provided an enthusiastic and energetic presentation of activities to come. After the presentations, the group ate dinner at the hotel and then headed to their rooms to prepare for the next day departure.



*Goodies for each guest on first night; And departing on 2<sup>nd</sup> day!*

On September 12, after breakfast in the hotel, the group boarded the bus for the journey to the first volunteer project location, Parque Nacional Carara. During the hour and a half long drive Marco introduced Driver and Assistant Guide, Fernando Sanchez, provided everyone with a map of Costa Rica and information on the natural and cultural history of the areas along the route.

At Parque Nacional Carara, Stephanie Joseph from ProParques, guided the group through the nearly four-hour project work along the Universal Access path. Parque Nacional Carara is one of three “universal” (all-accessible) national parks in the country. It is located where the “dry forests” stop and the rain forests begin in the country. It is also the breeding ground for Scarlet Macaws. The 800-meter universal trail loop had substantial moss build up from rains which had created a slippery condition on the trail. ConservationVIP® volunteers worked for about 3 hours in two teams of six people, scrubbing, brushing and washing the walkway to eliminate moss build up on the accessible cement trail.



*Process for cleaning all-access trail at Parque Nacional Carara*

Along with this trail work, Marco pointed out the local wildlife. The team of volunteers enjoyed spotting Scarlett Macaws, White Faced Monkeys, Blue Morpho Butterflies, Agouti (small mammal), and a Ctenosaur “Black Iguana” lizard.

After the work at Parque Nacional Carara, the group headed south and crossed the Crocodile Bridge where the group stopped for a walk along the bridge to see the crocodiles that inhabit the marsh and river ecosystem under the bridge.

Lunch was at a local family’s Soda and then the drive continued south stopping briefly near Jaco, to watch a large flock of Scarlet Macaws along the beach. This area along the coast from Parque Nacional Carara to Punta Banco is the migration pathway for Scarlet Macaws.



Continuing south to the Hotel Villas Rio Mar in Dominical, heavy rain started. The group enjoyed dinner together to revel in the activities and wildlife sightings of the day, before everyone retired to their rooms.

September 13 brought sunnier weather and the morning started with an optional 6:00am birdwatching activity lead by Marco. In the morning the birds are active right in the lodge area and the group could easily see Toucans, Quetzal, and a variety of humming birds.



After breakfast, the group boarded the bus for the drive to the next volunteer project location in Dominical just south of Uvita Peninsula (the Whale’s Tail). During the drive Marco provided information on the natural and cultural history of the areas along the route.

Arriving early at Parque Nacional Marino Ballena for the next project with ProParques, Stephanie once again introduced the project. This national park includes both a land and marine sanctuary known as a migration path and refuge for Humpback Whales. Work here included demolishing an old barb wired fence and building a new wooden boundary fence

that is 40-feet long at the entrance of the park. Volunteers worked for four and a half hours to remove the old barbed wire and wood plank fence, mixing concrete for new concrete posts, placing new concrete posts, sorting new wood planks from short to long, drilling holes in new fencing planks, and painting new wood planks.



*Boundary fence work at Parque Nacional Marino Ballena*

Both the ConservationVIP® Trip Leader Carol Clark, and the ProParque Volunteer Coordinator, Stephanie Joseph, made separate trips to the local hardware store to get some needed supplies that the rangers at Parque Nacional Marino Ballena did not have: Levels, extension cord, tape measures. It was great to see every volunteer take a personal initiative to jump in and collaborate on tasks.

After the work was complete, the group was off to a late lunch at the restaurant, Heladería Diquis. Due to the ongoing local strike that closed the bridge by the restaurant, the group relaxed for a couple of hours until the rains began and the bridge

traffic re-opened. Once the strikers cleared the road, the group boarded the bus and continued its journey south to Punta Banco, arriving at Casa Marea Alta that evening. Clyde Aspinall, the lodge owner, eagerly met the group at the gate. Clyde's family has been in the Punta Banco area for about three generations and are prominent members of the community who have helped to restore and sustain the eco-systems and biodiversity of the area. The group enjoyed dinner with discussions of the highlights of the next day's work and then retired to their rooms.

On September 14, the day began at 5:45am with a coffee meeting in the dining area to discuss the day's activities. After a short drive from the lodge to the Proyecto Conservación Tortugas (Punta Banco Community Association) Sea Turtle Hatchery, the group met with conservationists and community leaders Wilberth Vargas Guerrero and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez. Translated by Marco, Wilberth gave the group an introduction to the history of the Proyecto Conservación Tortugas (Punta Banco Community Association) and information about the community projects and the planned work for the day.

Here, after Wilberth carefully extracted 86 hatchlings from the nursery nest, he released the sea turtles to head out to sea as the group helped keep an eye on them and formed a safe boundary around the hatchlings.



*Hatchling release*

The group returned to the lodge for breakfast, then returned afterwards to the hatchery to build a natural barrier to protect the sea turtle hatchery from the tide and ongoing beach erosion. Utilizing driftwood and downed trees, the group built a more than four-foot high and 75-foot long barrier and planted 33 coconut palm trees from uprooted saplings or green coconuts found along the beach for deeper sea turtle nursery protection.



*Before - Work - After*

That evening the Punta Banco community invited the group to attend the local Independence Day celebration at the primary school. Some of the group took a break and relaxed at the lodge while others, along with Trip Leaders and Guides, attended the joyful event.

Later that evening, when the tides were lower, the group met up with Wilberth and Guillermo in the dining area of the lodge for a briefing on the night patrol activities and rules of engagement. Following a five-minute walk to the hatchery, for the next two hours the group walked together for the first night patrol letting eyes adjust to the darkness, following instructions about when to use the red LED light, learning how to look for turtle tracks (crawls) and half-moon crawls (false crawls). Not far from the entrance to the beach, the first adult sea turtle, an Olive Ridley, was found beginning nesting behavior. Trip guides and leaders repeatedly reinforced the rules of engagement to protect and not stress the sea turtle and keep it and the group members safe. This was an exciting moment for the group as they helped the community keep the sea turtle and the nest safe from local poachers, as well as supported the community member that recovered the eggs that were to be safely and carefully moved to the hatchery for nesting.

On this long day ConservationVIP® volunteers donated a total of 150 hours for the day and evening of work.

September 15th began at 5:45am and for nearly two hours the group worked at another Punta Banco Community sea turtle hatchery located at the south end of the

community by the Rancho Burica Hostel. This project was to restore a turtle hatchery after a few months of no use and to eliminate contamination from eggs remains. The group divided into subgroups and cleared brush, raked out leaves, removed plaques and fencing, and dug out the old contaminated sand.



Back at the host lodge at breakfast, Clyde Aspinall gave a brief talk on how his family and the community worked with the reforestation of the area and the reintroduction of Scarlet Macaws over the years. Following that, for the next two hours the group returned to the north hatchery to exhume hatched nests and count egg remains in order to determine how many sea turtles survived, and to document the stages of those that did not. Assisting Wilberth and Guillermo the group exhumed, counted and recorded the data for the community and national records. Exhumed nest C1 held a total of 97 full egg remains: C19 totaled 47, C21 totaled 106, D4 totaled 83, D6 totaled 85 and D8 totaled 92.



*Meghan exhuming eggs from nest*



*Dana, Guillermo and Carol counting the eggs*



*Lydia sharing data for all the exhumations that day*

After lunch and a rest break out of the heat of the day, the group returned to the sea turtle hatchery at the south end of the community at the Rancho Burica lodge to continue the restoration work. At this point the volunteers split into two groups. Working for two hours, one group finished removing the fencing and continued digging out the old and contaminated sand. While doing this, the group came upon Iguana eggs which were then re-buried outside of the turtle hatchery. The other group began painting 20 blank plaques that would be used in the future to hang on the hatchery with the names of volunteers and donors to the project. Ten (10) cubic yards of sand were removed

from the nursery by shovel and wheel barrel. It was exhausting work and less than half of the sand could be removed during this trip.

Later there was news of an early nesting, and the group gathered just after dinner to head to the beach just below the north hatchery where another Olive Ridley was making a nest to lay eggs. This evening the team did a stellar job remembering to watch completely from behind the turtle and keep a safe distance to avoid stressing the turtle and keep it safe. This nest held 89 eggs. The group continued with two hours of night patrol utilizing the techniques learned the night before.



ConservationVIP® volunteers donated 104 group hours for the entire day and evening of work.

Enjoying a slightly later breakfast on September 16<sup>th</sup>, the morning started with a short ride to the south end of the community by the primary school. For two and a half hours the group split into two groups for beach cleanup. One group worked the south portion of the beach near the creek and school while the other group worked north of the school with both groups meeting up in the middle. During this time the local Soda operator donated several empty trash bags towards the effort, thanking the group for the work. Other community members also joined in. Ten 32-gallon bags equaling 320 gallons of trash and nine 51-gallon bags equaling 459 gallons of trash were collected.

The grand total for this effort was 779 gallons of trash was collected during 32.5 volunteer hours.



The group returned to the lodge for a rest period, lunch and down time during the hottest part of the day later continuing with beach and road clean up. The group worked together and walked from shoreline to tree line; to the road north of the Alta lodge. During this time several community members joined the trash collection efforts. Six (6) 51gallon bags of trash equaling 306 gallons were collected.

Some of the group returned to the lodge and others walked to the nearby cantina for much needed break until dinner. Night patrol began around 9:00pm when the tide was low enough to patrol the beach. Meeting up with Guillermo and another community member, they led the walk toward the northern beach for night patrol. Before heading out, the rules of engagement were again reiterated. Again, the patrol did not have to go far before coming across an Olive Ridley sea turtle exhibiting nesting behavior. This turtle laid 106 eggs. One more nesting Olive Ridley was located and observed during the patrols.

ConservationVIP® volunteers donated 55 volunteer hours for the entire day and evening work.

On September 17<sup>th</sup>, the morning began at 5:45am and work consisted of a bird count along the road to spot and collect data on birds seen in the area for the community and national data bases. The walk was cut short due to heavy rain.

After breakfast the first half of the day was rest time. Some chose optional activities such as Horseback Riding and Surfing lessons, while others stayed at the lodge.

After lunch and the afternoon break the group gathered for the Bird and Mammal Count at Tiskita, a short walk from the lodge. Twenty-three (23) species of birds were documented along with four species of mammals. Among the listed were two species



of Sloths, Howler Monkeys, Butterflies, White Falcon, Painted Toucan, Scarlet Macaws. The data captured on this walk will be used for the community and national data bases. Field note books on bird, mammal and the sea turtle nesting will be kept for the next groups to add data into. ConservationVIP<sup>®</sup> volunteers donated a total of 33 volunteer hours of work.

Returning to the lodge, everyone began packing up luggage until dinner. A couple local artisans from the nearby indigenous community brought their crafts to the lodge and the group was able to see their handiwork and purchase what they wanted. Everyone, along with Wilberth and Clyde, celebrated the success of the work completed in Punta Banco, and the new friendships made in the community.

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, goodbyes and hugs with the community were plentiful as the group departed Casa Marea Alta to begin the six-hour drive north up to the cloud forests of Cerro de la Muerte, an elevation gain of over 11,000 feet! Along the way the trip ran into a strike at about 10:30am and the journey was at a stand-still. The road was blocked for about 90 minutes without incident. However due to the delay the scheduled lunch with a local family and the trail hike with trash pickup planned through Cerro de la Muerte had to be cancelled. Instead, lunch was at the lovely Soda Los Puentes. Fortunately, further strikes were avoided, and the drive continued north to the Paraíso Quetzal Lodge on Cerro de la Muerte at Dota. A wood fireplace and wonderful views of hummingbird feeders and the mountains greeted the group as everyone settled into their rooms and had dinner. While not a heavy physical work day, the long drive, stop time due to the strike and being in the bus all day took its toll on the group. Jackets were pulled out in the chilly mountain air and bedtime was early.

The following day, September 19<sup>th</sup>, after an optional bird walk and breakfast, the group was joined by Eric Granados, a community member of Sal Si Puedes and local bird watcher who led the group in the process of how to build Quetzal and Owl Nests. As the group worked out the system and steps, Trip Leaders documented the procedures and progress.



Running out of time, the group accompanied the pickup truck with the artificial nests to an area near where they would be installed. At this time Marco and Eric were able to locate Quetzals in the forest near the road and everyone was treated to fantastic views

of the birds that they built the nests for. In total the group contributed 52 hours of volunteer work here.

After lunch and loading up the bus, Fernando headed towards the Don Carlos hotel in San José, arriving in the late afternoon. Adjusting back into the big city arena the group settled into rooms, some went for short walks and then gathered for the final dinner with Marco and Fernando. The volunteers were particularly generous and left extra gear, spare clothing and even boots for the community.

On the last day, September 20<sup>th</sup>, the 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 primary goal for the Costa Rica Volunteer Trip was to protect the sea turtles that nest on the beaches in the Punta Banco area. Since this was the inaugural trip to Punta Banco, Costa Rica for ConservationVIP®, goals for this trip also included verifying locations, partnerships and project work. The group donated 523 hours of hard work during the entire trip. While a small portion of the planned project work was not initiated or was not completed because of the weather, strike interruptions, or scheduling, the goals of this trip can certainly be marked as successful.

### **Acknowledgements**

ConservationVIP® wishes to offer special thanks to the Costa Rica Sun Tours' guides, Marco Fallas, and Fernando Sanchez, ProParques volunteer Stephanie Joseph, Punta Banco Community Association leaders, Wilberth Vargas Guerrero and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez, and Eric Granados. We especially want to thank the many Punta Banco community members who cooked and cleaned for us, showed us how to protect this very special place, and shared their time with us.

As one volunteer stated: "We entered the small village of Punta Banco as a group of foreigners and left feeling part of their community."

**Pura Vida!**