



## PROJECT REPORT COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP September 7-16, 2021



*ConservationVIP Volunteers in front of the Tiskita Hatchery sea wall barrier*

### Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to Punta Banco in the southwest corner of Costa Rica in September 2021. Eleven volunteers, traveling from the United States, including Trip Leaders Carol Clark and Shelley Sankey, met in San José, Costa Rica to begin the

journey. Marco Fallas, a Guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, joined the group for the orientation meeting and stayed throughout the trip.

Work focused on the three main regions in the Central and South Pacific areas of Costa Rica and one in the Highlands: Tárcoles, to work on Scarlet Macaw habitat; in Savegre on the Pacific coast at the Hacienda Baru National Wildlife Refuge; and the trip's primary work project, aiding in protecting the sea turtles that nest on the South Pacific Coast beaches of Punta Banco. The sea turtle community projects in Punta Banco 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." Work in the highlands in Cerro de la Muerte centered on restoring the Resplendent Quetzal habitat.

Volunteers contributed a total of 407 hours towards these projects, built one almond tree nursery, harvested and planted 300 almond tree saplings, refreshed, and rebuilt three sea turtle hatcheries, deconstructed one sea turtle hatchery and plotted out, placed posts at one new hatchery, exhumed 533 sea turtle eggs and cataloged them by stages, released 118 hatchlings, built two new Quetzal nests and fixed one standing nest.

## Detailed Trip Report

### SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

#### San José:

Our group met at our hotel on September 7<sup>th</sup> for an introductory meeting and orientation to the work projects and the days ahead. Costa Rica Sun Tours guide Marco Fallas joined us and shared his infectious excitement about the work locations.

#### Tárcoles:

The following morning, September 8, our bus driver and assistant guide, Sergio Miranda drove the group through the metropolitan highways of a busy, noisy San José and eased us into the less crowded, more rural communities to the area of Tárcoles, a small coastal village to begin the first workday. The coastal communities along this area have established a corridor of beach almond tree (*Terminalia catappa*) nurseries. The almond tree is the main food for the endangered Scarlet Macaws. One group of volunteers measured out an area and dug post holes two feet deep and attached a wood skirt around the base level.





The top was covered with a mesh roof. As the nursery was being built the second group of volunteers filled biodegradable seedling bags with rich soil gathered from under a mature almond tree and manually collected seedlings from under the same tree. Since the shade and root system from the mature tree would stunt the growth of these tiny saplings, these 300 saplings were placed into the new nursery and in approx 8 months will be replanted along the beach front.



Later that afternoon the group boarded the bus and headed to the next worksite, at Hacienda Bari Wildlife Refuge, approximately 2.5 hours away at Savegre, where the group settled into their rooms and ate dinner before retiring for the evening.

### **Savegre:**

Project work on September 9 began in the morning and included two projects arranged by two park rangers: hatchery expansion and, on the beach just behind the hatchery, a coconut barrier project.



*Scarlet Macaws spotted along the road to Savegre*

Halfway through the day's project the groups switched. One group of volunteers worked in the refuge's turtle hatchery. The refuge's goal is to expand the current hatchery, making it double the current size by adding approximately 150 yards (7 or 8 dump truck loads we were told) of fresh sand that had been piled into the center on the new area in several mounds. Volunteers worked at shoveling the sand from the mound towards the outer mound and rails.

While this was going on, the other group went to the beach and dug two holes approximately 4ft x 6ft. A common practice in some hatchery areas is to collect fallen and small sprouted coconuts and fill the holes with them creating a slightly raised

area to offset tides. The sprouted coconuts will eventually grow up out of the sand and help slow erosion, the collection of the fallen and broken coconuts will also help eliminate standing water, the cause of Mosquito infestations and the Zika virus.



*Sand piled into mounds was aeriated by shoveling to either side and then filling into a flat surface lining up to the current hatchery level*



*Two pits were dug and filled with fallen and sprouting coconuts and covered creating a small sea barrier.*

Following these two difficult projects in high humidity, and after extending great effort shoveling sand, the group walked back to the lodge, showered, and packed up. After lunch, we said goodbye to our hosts and began the long drive to Punta Banco, stopping along the way to stretch our legs at an area that has many Scarlet Macaws, grabbing a few personal groceries, beverages, and snacks before arriving just at nightfall.

### **Punta Banco Sea Turtle Project:** September 9-September 13

Arriving at Casa Marea Alta in Punta Banco on the evening of September 9, the lodge owner Clyde Aspinall met the group and assisted with getting everyone settled into their lodge rooms. The group also met conservationists and community leaders, Wilberth Vargas Guerrero and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez from Proyecto Conservación Tortugas. Following dinner, the group had a briefing on sea turtles and the upcoming projects by Thomas Koblinger, Marine Biologist.

Before breakfast the following morning, the group walked directly from the lodge to the Proyecto Conservación Tortugas Hatchery where they were provided with an orientation to the projects.



Throughout the stay in Punta Banco, volunteers worked at the three community sea turtle nurseries, Tiskita, Punta Banco, and Playa Burica, all located within a short walk of each other. Two night patrols covering the three hatcheries turned up one nesting Olive Ridley turtle that laid 104 eggs and one turtle that exhibited “false crawl” behavior by coming ashore and then returning to sea without making a nest or laying eggs. One of the largest hard shelled sea turtles, the Pacific Green Back, was seen one night. She exhibited “false crawl” behavior. One night patrol was scrapped due to heavy rain and a lightning storm.

### **Punta Banco Hatchery Area**

Volunteers worked on preparing the 4ft.x20ft.x30ft. hatchery for receipt of sea turtle eggs. This involved refreshing the sand by raking off the leaf and branch debris, digging 2-3 feet deep and tossing the sand to the center, clearing approximately 4 feet away from the hatchery edges. Hatchery space for the eggs was in high demand, and this was the quick method of cleaning up the hatchery to prepare for more eggs.



Volunteers also rebuilt and expanded the Punta Banco barrier seawall, a continuous project due to the high tides.



*Rebuilding and expanding the natural sea barrier*

On three occasions volunteers released a total of 178 hatched Olive Ridley hatchlings.



*Releasing recently hatched Olive Ridley Sea Turtles*

For many years the Punta Banco Community Association worked under a thatched roof open shelter with no central office or anywhere to keep shared tools out of the elements. After the new schoolhouse was built recently, the Association was able to get access to the old schoolhouse to use it for a secure indoor sea turtle office, store tools, a small kitchen to create a small community “downtown walk”. All the proceeds from food cooked, bikes rented, t-shirts sold there is now kept in the Association fund to keep the sea turtle projects going. We were told that because of the community relationship with ConservationVIP® the local officials were swayed to allow all of this to happen. It all started with ConservationVIP® volunteer works contributing and committing to the protection of the endangered sea turtles.



*Volunteers removed debris and helped paint some of the interior walls and portico of the new Conservation Community Association building (the old schoolhouse)*

### **Tiskita Hatchery area:**

The group exhumed 533 egg casings of hatched sea turtle eggs from the nursery; data was recorded on the numbers of different stages of the carcasses. Volunteers moved large pieces of driftwood to extend and reinforced the natural sea barrier.





*Volunteers observing the process of categorizing the exhumed egg casings, counting the various stages, recording the date and then burying the egg casings.*

### **Playa Burica Hatchery area:**

Volunteers deconstructed the old hatchery under the trees and powerline and laid out the posts for the new hatchery that is now out from under the heavy tree canopy.



*Deconstruction of the old hatchery and beginning to plot out the new hatchery at Playa Burica*

### **Cerro de la Muerte in the Highlands:**

After the long return drive from Punta Banco to Cerro de La Muerte on September 14, we stopped at the Paradiso Quetzal Lodge just in time for a beautiful sunset. Situated at 8,858 feet above sea level, volunteers brought out the sweaters and huddled by the wood fireplace, a change from the heat and humidity of the previous five days.

After breakfast, on September 15th, the group joined Eric Granados, a community member of Sal Si Puedes and our Quetzal nest project manager, who led the group in the process of how to build two Quetzal nests. The nests are built to replace those that had been lost from storms and loss of habitat near the Parque Nacional Quetzal and within the Quetzal District. One previously installed nest post was dug out and the nest lowered for repairs and then replaced in the same spot. During rest breaks the group took time to view Quetzals in their natural habitat.



After lunch the group boarded the bus for the last time to head into San José, stopping just outside the city proper to get COVID-19 tests required to return to the United States. That evening we enjoyed a celebratory beverage and dinner at the hotel and had our final dinner celebration for this successful trip.

### Final Reflections

The primary goal for the Costa Rica Volunteer Trip is to protect the sea turtles that nest on the beaches in the Punta Banco area. Volunteers also assisted on two new Costa Rican projects: building an almond tree nursery to provide for the endangered Scarlet Macaw and assist rangers with expanding the sea turtle hatchery and clearing up beach debris and stabilizing beach areas by using fallen palm coconuts and sand, at Hacienda Baru Wildlife refuge. Volunteers also contributed to the protection of the endangered Quetzal nesting habitat. It is worth noting that ConservationVIP® is the **only** volunteer group working in Punta Banco and with the Quetzal project. In all, this group donated 407 hours of hard work in a hot and humid environment while being able to experience some of the most incredible landscapes, nature, and communities in Costa Rica



**Special moments:** During the final night at Punta Banco, our volunteers, along with local sea turtle patrollers, were honored at a small community dinner, complete with food, and music. Small awards, provided by Costa Rica Sun Tours and ConservationVIP®, were presented to members of the community association who did exceptional work in finding nesting sea turtles, and collecting the eggs.

This was the first international trip that ConservationVIP® led since October 2019 due to the world-wide pandemic. The local communities we worked in were ready for our volunteers to come and work. Volunteers were prepared to travel to Costa Rica, taking on the extra care to follow the new travel rules, adhere to COVID-19 protocols, respect each other, and become part of what Wilberth called us during the awards celebration, the “familia”.

**Acknowledgements:** ConservationVIP® wishes to offer special thanks to all the volunteers who worked so hard to keep these projects going; to Costa Rica Sun Tours for arranging all the moving pieces on this trip; and to the best guide ever, Marco Fallas; to our incredible bus driver, Sergio Miranda who worked side by side with us; to Donna Miriam for setting aside part of her land for the almond tree nursery; for the park rangers at Hacienda Baru Wildlife Preserve getting us started; to Punta Banco Community Association leaders; Paola Carrillo, Reinoud Van Vreedendaal, Wilberth Vargas Guerrero, and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez, Thomas Koebling; and to Quetzal Project Manager, 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.

**Pura Vida!**



*Resplendent Quetzal at Cerro de La Muerte*