



## PROJECT REPORT COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP October 19-28, 2021



*ConservationVIP Volunteers at the new Playa Burica Sea Turtle Hatchery*

### Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to Punta Banco in the southwest corner of Costa Rica in October 2021. Nine volunteers, traveling from the United States, including Trip Leaders Janice Ballak and Kelly McCoy, met in San José, Costa Rica to begin the journey. Marco “Tex” 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 391 hours towards these projects, built an extension to the almond tree nursery built in September, harvested and planted 272 almond tree saplings, built one sea turtle hatchery, painted and refreshed wildlife refuge signage, performed maintenance on 18 bicycles used for sea turtle patrols, exhumed 1308 sea turtle eggs and cataloged them by stages, released 1095 hatchlings, assembled and erected one new Resplendent Quetzal nest and built a new quetzal viewing trail.

## DETAILED TRIP REPORT

### SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

#### San José:

Our group met at our hotel on October 19<sup>th</sup> for an introductory meeting and orientation to the work projects and the days ahead. Costa Rica Sun Tours guide Marco "Tex" Fallas joined us and shared his infectious excitement about the work locations.

#### Tárcoles:

The following morning, October 20<sup>th</sup>, our bus driver and assistant guide, Alvaro "Albarito" Chavez Corrales 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 source for the endangered Scarlet Macaws.





One group of volunteers added an extension to the new tree nursery that the September Group built. They 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.

*Group builds the extension for the Tárcoles Tree Nursery*



As the extension to 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 272 seedlings from under the same tree. Since the



shade and root system from the mature tree would stunt the growth of these tiny saplings, the saplings were placed into the new nursery and in approximately eight months will be replanted along the beach front.

*Rest of the group harvests almond tree saplings that are placed in the tree nursery extension.*





**Scarlet Macaws**

Later that afternoon the group boarded the bus and headed to the next worksite, at Hacienda Baru 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 October 21 began in the morning and included two sign projects arranged by two park rangers: creating bi-lingual signage for the sea turtle hatchery and refreshing the signs that are at the beach entrance and trailheads just behind the sea turtle hatchery. All together 13 signs were worked on. Halfway through the day's project one of the groups also did a beach clean-up, picking up two bags of trash.

*Group creating bilingual signs for the Hacienda Baru Wildlife Refuge.*



*The group refreshing signs along the beach entrance and trail heads at the Hacienda Baru Wildlife Refuge*



Following these two projects in high humidity, 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 at nightfall. We also encountered a two-toed Sloth along the way!



### **Punta Banco Sea Turtle Project: October 21<sup>st</sup> - October 25<sup>th</sup>**

Upon arrival at Casa Marea Alta in Punta Banco on the evening of October 21st 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.

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 exhibited “false crawl” behavior by coming ashore and then returning to sea without making a nest or laying eggs.



## Playa Burica Hatchery Area

Volunteers worked on building a new 225 square foot hatchery at Playa Burica. The teams split into two groups. One group worked on building the frame and foundation of the new hatchery, while the other group worked on preparing it to receive sea turtle eggs.

Group one dug holes for posts that hold the siding, then placed the posts, and subsequently the wood siding. And finally, they built supports after all the sand was placed in the hatchery.



Group two removed the grass within the hatchery and added in new sand. There was enough sand to create 100 nests that were each about 3 feet deep. The sand had to be piled in using shovels and wheelbarrows, then flattened out with a steel head rake. This was a two-day process.







Once all the sand was placed, the teams came together to paint on the coding system of numbers and letters that help the community identify the nests, and then they helped to grid the hatchery for each nest. The final touch was painting signs for the nest that each volunteer was able to adopt.





On two occasions volunteers released a total of 1095 sea turtle hatchlings 1027 Olive Ridleys and 68 Greenbacks. The group also witnessed 400 already being released by Willberth, Guillermo and other community members. Our last planned release was called off due to lightening.

*The group orientation at the Tiskita hatchery, then participating in the first sea turtle release*



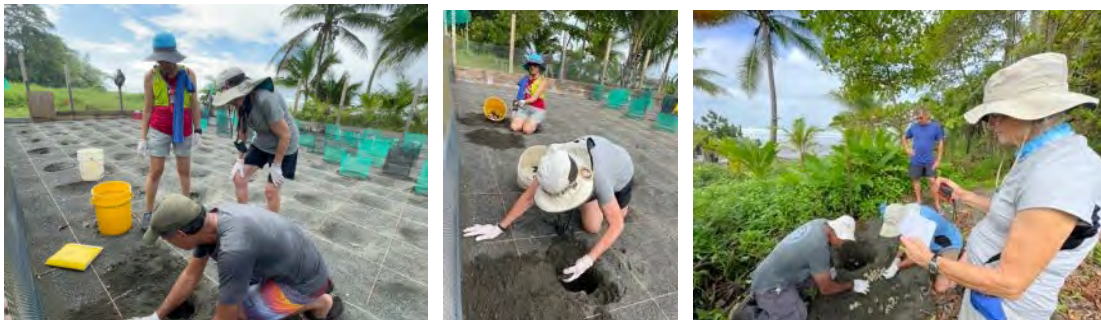
After checking out the new Punta Banco Community Association headquarters the group worked together on a maintenance project of the bikes used for Sea Turtle Patrols. The group dismantled, sanded, and prepped the bikes for painting. Besides being used for night patrol, the bikes are also rented for \$15.00 a day. The income that is generated goes back to the Punta Banco Conservation Community Association which helps to protect the Sea Turtles and the hatcheries.

*Volunteers removed debris and rust from the Conservation Community Association bikes used for sea turtle patrol. Preparing them for new paint.*



### **Tiskita Hatchery area:**

The group exhumed 1308 egg casings of hatched sea turtle eggs from the nursery; data was recorded on the numbers of different stages of the carcasses. This was a combination of Olive Ridleys and Greenbacks. The group was excited to discover two live sea turtles that were released during this process.



*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 headed back to this area to work on a beach cleanup and paint signage for the newly constructed hatchery. After five days of hard work our group had a final dinner with community members at Rancho Burica. At this dinner, community members were recognized for their commitment to the protection of Sea Turtles in the Punta Banco community. We also learned about the ripple effect this program is having on surrounding communities. Other communities are beginning similar Sea Turtle protection efforts.



*Volunteers after beach cleanup and saying goodbye to the Punta Banco and Casa Marea Alta !*

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

After the long return drive from Punta Banco to Cerro de La Muerte on October 26<sup>th</sup> 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 October 27<sup>th</sup> the group joined Eric Granados, a community member of Sal Si Puedes and our Resplendent Quetzal nest project manager, who led the group in the process of how to build and assemble a pre-made Quetzal nest as well as building a viewing trail near a tree where Quetzals have been feeding. During our time together Eric also demonstrated how the nests are built and why they are important in sustaining the Resplendent Quetzal habitat.

*Volunteers assembling and erecting a Resplendent Quetzal nest.*



*Volunteers building a trail to view the Resplendent Quetzal near fruit trees.*





After these projects were complete, we visited a local farmer who has trees that host seven Resplendent Quetzals and many other bird species. Sal Si Puedes has helped the farmer to sustain the habitat and have included perching posts around the trees. So, our group was lucky to have some amazing close-up sightings of this magnificent bird.



*Resplendent Quetzal at Cerro de La Muerte*

After lunch the group boarded the bus for the last time to head back to San José, where we checked into the hotel and awaited a lab tech to come to administer each volunteer's COVID-19 tests required to return to the United States. That evening we 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 other Costa Rican projects: building an almond tree nursery to provide for the endangered Scarlet Macaw and assisting 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 Resplendent Quetzal nesting habitat. It is worth noting that ConservationVIP® is the **only** volunteer group working in Punta Banco and with the Resplendent Quetzal project. In all, this group donated 391 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. Our October group had

some amazing wildlife sightings during this trip. We think there was a Sloth and Resplendent Quetzal whisperer in the group!

**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 second international trip that ConservationVIP® led to Costa Rica since 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, Alvaro “Albarito” Chavez Corrales 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 the 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!!**