



**PROJECT REPORT  
COSTA RICA VOLUNTEER TRIP  
SEPTEMBER 9-18, 2023**



*One of the largest Ficus Trees at Hacienda Baru Wildlife Refuge*

**Executive Summary**

In September 2023, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) orchestrated and led a volunteer trip to Punta Banco, nestled in the southwestern corner of Costa Rica. The group, consisting of eleven individuals, embarked with a shared passion for conservation.

Guiding the group throughout the trip was Alex Arias, an invaluable local guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, who provided insightful guidance from the very beginning. Additionally, Sergio Miranda, the skilled and supportive driver joined the group on Day 2, accompanying them and lending a helping hand throughout the entire journey.

The dedicated efforts of the volunteers were focused on four distinct regions in the Central and South Pacific areas of Costa Rica. The first project aimed to preserve the Scarlet Macaw habitat in Tárcoles. The next undertaking took place at the Hacienda Baru National Wildlife Refuge in Savegre, along the Pacific coast. However, the primary focus of the trip is centered around the protection of sea turtles nesting on the beaches of Punta Banco on the South Pacific Coast. These conservation initiatives were carried out in collaboration with the Proyecto Conservación Tortugas (Punta Banco Community Association), a local nonprofit organization established in 2004. Their mission is to enhance the conservation conditions for sea turtles inhabiting and nesting along the coastline of the Osa canton, particularly at Punta Banco beach.

Furthermore, the volunteers dedicated an impressive total of about 366 collective volunteer hours towards various projects. Their hard work and determination enabled them to accomplish the following: Along the Tárcoles beach, they carefully planted 10 almond trees, each standing at a height of 2 feet. In addition, they replaced worn-out fabric and constructed a sturdy worktable in the tree nursery. 53 compostable planting bags were filled with soil. These bags will serve as valuable resources for local school children, who will use them to plant almond seeds that will eventually grow to nurture Scarlet Macaws.

The conservation endeavors extended to the new Punta Banco sea turtle hatchery, an expansive site measuring an impressive 30x30 feet. The volunteers tirelessly transported approximately 425 wheelbarrows filled with beach sand to this location. With care and precision, they filled the enclosure with a staggering 3600 cubic square feet of sand. The hatchery was then secured by attaching 3-foot netting above the framework. To ensure the safety of sea turtle eggs, the group built 16 nest cages, creating a protective environment within the grid plots where the sea turtle eggs would be deposited. Then a natural sea barrier wall, measuring 20x6, was constructed to safeguard another hatchery.

During their tireless efforts, the group had the joyous opportunity to release an estimated total of 257 hatchlings into the ocean. During a night patrol, they witnessed an awe-inspiring sight: an Olive Ridley sea turtle laying 83 eggs. The volunteers also undertook the vital task of carefully excavating 8 hatched nests, diligently collecting data on the various stages of egg development within each nest.

In the cooler cloud forests of the highlands of Cerro de la Muerte, the volunteers constructed a 75-foot natural dirt staircase. This staircase, accompanied by a sturdy wooden handrail, created a safe and accessible trail leading to the designated area for the majestic Quetzal nest settings. In addition, they assisted in building a brand-new nest for the Resplendent Quetzal species. Volunteers relocated a completed nest onto a towering 25-foot wooden post within the designated natural area. The volunteers' efforts in creating a suitable habitat for the Quetzal were instrumental in supporting the preservation and well-being of these magnificent birds.

Through their dedication and hard work, the group left a tangible and lasting impact on the various ecosystems they encountered during this volunteer trip. Their efforts contributed to the conservation and protection of vital habitats, leaving behind a legacy that will benefit both the local communities and the remarkable wildlife that call these areas home.

**DETAILED TRIP REPORT SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:****San José:**

The first day, September 9, the group met at the hotel for an introductory meeting and orientation to the work projects of the days ahead. Costa Rica Sun Tours guide Alex Arias joined in and shared the itinerary and outlook on what the group might expect in the coming days.

**Tárcoles:**

The following morning, the group boarded our private transportation and drove through the city of San José easing into the quieter rural communities of Tárcoles. The coastal communities along this area have established a corridor of beach almond tree nurseries. The almond tree is the main food source for the endangered Scarlet Macaws. Along the way we stopped at a local nursery and purchased some potting soil and 10 Beach Almond trees.



The group split up and some worked on fixing the one existing nursery and building a workbench. The other group dug 2-foot holes along a stretch of the beach area in front of the high tide line and planted the 10 almond trees. Throughout the work the group would stop to listen to and watch Scarlet Macaws as they flew over the area or perched in nearby trees.



Other volunteers repaired the sapling nursery structure by replacing and mending the outside netting, shoring up poles, building a workbench and filling



the fifty-three 10-inch compostable planting bags with soil that local school children will plant almond seeds in.



After a wonderful home cooked meal, the group boarded the bus and continued to Hacienda Baru Wildlife Refuge and arrived just before dark, in time to settle in and enjoy sharing the day's events over dinner.



Hacienda Baru Wildlife Refuge is a privately-owned nature reserve that spans over 815 acres of lush tropical rainforest, expansive mangrove swamps and breathtaking coastline. There is an astounding array of flora, including orchids, towering trees, including one of the largest strangler figs in the area (see photo on page 1) and it hosts an environmental research and education center.

With the dawn of a new day, before breakfast, some members of the group accompanied Alex on a nature walk. As they meandered along the path, they caught sight of a Toucan perched amidst the foliage and a Capuchin monkey.

After breakfast, the group set out once again, this time venturing along one of the extensive network of trails that wound its way through the lush jungle. A keen eye was kept on the lookout for any litter or debris, fostering a commitment to maintaining the surroundings. Along the trail the group took time to appreciate the various trail layouts, signage, and boardwalk constructions employed in the area, noting how each element contributed to the overall trail experience.

After the trail inspection, the group once again gathered on the bus to embark on the long drive to Punta Banco, the primary volunteer project site. Along the way, they made several stops to ensure everyone remained refreshed and energized. A lunch break provided a much-needed opportunity to refuel, while another stop allowed the group to stretch their legs and indulge in bird watching. A final stop at a grocery store offered a chance to use the facilities and gather personal supplies, including groceries, beverages, and snacks, for their time in remote Punta Banco.

As the day neared its end, the group reached Punta Banco just before darkness set in. They dropped their bags into their lodge rooms, and were then greeted by Thomas Koebling, the Program Manager of the Punta Banco Community Association, who offered a comprehensive orientation to Proyecto Conservación Tortugas and the various community projects. The group was introduced to Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez, a respected community leader who would guide their work over the following days.

Thomas proceeded to outline the work project priorities for the group, emphasizing the crucial tasks that lay ahead. First, the completion of the new hatchery was of utmost importance, as the existing two hatcheries were already filled to capacity. Second, the group would focus on reinforcing the natural sea barrier walls at one of the existing hatcheries. Strengthening these walls would enhance protection against potential erosion and increase the long-term stability of the nesting sites. If time permitted, the group would undertake a reforestation initiative. This would involve planting Coconut and Beach Almond trees strategically to act as additional barriers against erosion, further protecting the coastal ecosystem.



Thomas further shared information about the positive impact of the community's conservation efforts. In 2015, the area averaged around 300 sea turtle nests. However, through the dedicated conservation work by the community, these numbers had significantly increased. Presently, the average number of nests ranges between 500 to 800, exhibiting good progress. Over the years, an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 turtles had hatched as a result of these conservation endeavors. The Olive Ridley sea turtle is the most prevalent

species, constituting approximately 90% of the nesting population. Other turtle species, including Hawksbill, Green, and occasionally Leatherbacks have also been recorded nesting in this area.

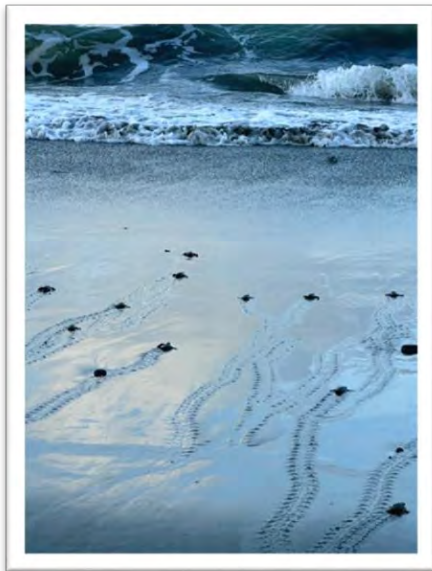
### **Punta Banco Sea Turtle Project:**

The workdays in Punta Banco started early, typically around 5:30 am. On the morning of Day 4, the group had the opportunity of releasing their first two batches of hatched sea turtles. The nests held 74 and 86 hatchlings respectively. Adhering to the protocols that ensure the well-being of the hatchlings, the releases took place during the early morning or late afternoon hours when the temperatures were cooler. This provided the hatchlings with the optimal conditions for their release into the ocean.

During their night patrols, the group experienced an awe-inspiring moment as they encountered an Olive Ridley sea turtle laying a clutch of 83 eggs. This remarkable event showcased the ongoing cycle of life and the vital role of sea turtles in the ecosystem. Throughout their time in Punta Banco, the group took part in the release of an additional 166 hatchlings.

Further contributing to the conservation data collection, the group undertook the important task of excavating eight hatched nests. During this process, meticulous data was recorded to categorize and document the various stages of development. This involved counting the shell casings, assessing the number of pipped (partially hatched) embryos, and identifying any undeveloped eggs. These records will provide valuable insights into the overall health and viability of the sea turtle population in Punta Banco.





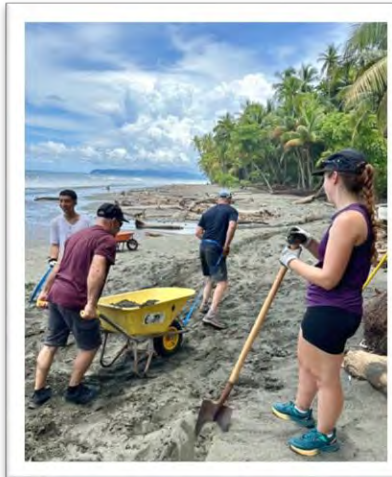
### The Hatchery Work



Throughout the stay in Punta Banco, volunteers worked at two community sea turtle hatcheries in Punta Banco, located within a short walk of each other. The top priority project was to complete the new 30x30 foot hatchery started near the old school, now used by the Association. The hard work at this site entailed removing rocks and debris from the sand in the hatchery, shoveling fresh beach sand into wheelbarrows, pushing them up an embankment, dumping it into the right locations, spreading it and repeating. Over the course of our stay the group filled 425 wheel

barrels and deposited approximately 3,600 cubic feet of sand into the hatchery, built surrounding walls, painted grid numbers, attached netting and built 16 mesh nest cages for incoming eggs.

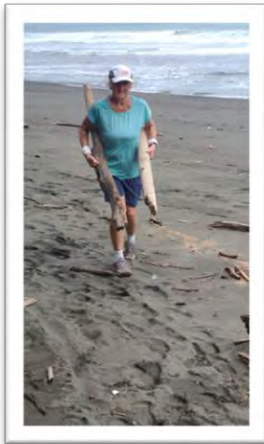




*Far right: Punta Banco younger generation assisting on the hatchery; Justin & Luis*



*Completed!*

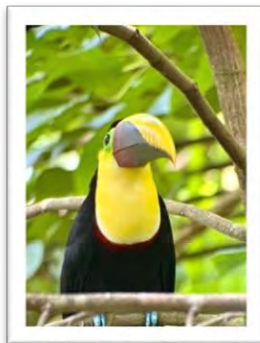
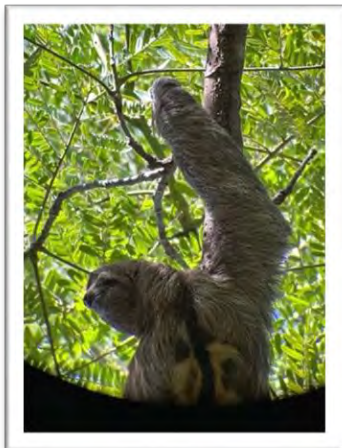
**The Natural Barrier Wall:**

The next project was to build up the natural barrier wall by the other hatchery. The weather began changing at this point and afternoon thunderstorms caused the group to stop and start on the project as they sought shelter. A 20x6 ft barrier was built by collecting logs, driftwood, and palm fronds.



Throughout the volunteer trip, the group also experienced moments of relaxation and enjoyment. On their way back to their accommodations, the group would pause at the local swimming hole to soak their feet or take a refreshing swim. The volunteers also enjoyed the sunset along the beach and the tranquility offered by the coastal surroundings. Additionally, the group had a well-deserved rest day on September 14th, providing them with an opportunity to recharge their energies. During this much-needed break, some volunteers opted to stay at the lodge, taking advantage of the chance to rest and rejuvenate.





Others embarked on an early hike to Tiskita lodge, where they were able to view two and three-toed sloths, howler monkeys, and toucans.

The community extended an invitation to the group to attend their Punta "Bingo" fundraising event held at the new school. Several volunteers participated in this festivity. Later in the afternoon, the group was taken to the town of Pavones, where they enjoyed watching a

celebration in honor of Costa Rica's Independence Day, which was to be celebrated the following day. The community gathered to watch as torch-led runners, proudly carrying the flag of Costa Rica, ran into the field. This breathtaking spectacle was followed by school children dressed in colorful costumes, who delighted the audience with traditional dances.

As the volunteer trip neared its end, the final night in Punta Banco transformed into a heartwarming community gathering. During a communal dinner, awards were presented to individuals who had made remarkable contributions to the community, whether it was in collecting eggs during night patrols or building and monitoring nests in the hatcheries. The community members and volunteer trip leaders expressed their sincere gratitude for the collective work accomplished, as well as for the hospitality extended through lodging and meals.

With tables and chairs pushed aside, the atmosphere filled with joy as dancing commenced. The group joined in the lessons of Costa Rican dances, and it was a joyous occasion, creating a deep connection and leaving the volunteers with a genuine appreciation for the people, the place, and the purpose that united them. These moments capture the true spirit of ConservationVIP®, fostering meaningful connections between individuals while actively working towards a shared goal.

### **Cerro de la Muerte - The Highlands:**

After a long drive from Punta Banco, the group finally arrived at Cerro de La Muerte, specifically at the picturesque Paradiso Quetzal Lodge. Situated at an impressive elevation of 8,858 feet above sea level, the volunteers welcomed the change from the heat and humidity they had experienced over the previous five days. As they settled into their new surroundings, they reached for their sweaters and gathered around the warm glow of the wood fireplace.

The following morning brought an opportunity for birdwatching, with hummingbirds captivating the group's attention. Some fortunate members even had the privilege of sighting the magnificent Resplendent Quetzal right at the Paradiso lodge. The group then prepared to join Eric Granados, the Project Manager, a member of the KABEK-Families Pro-Quetzal project. Eric's young son, Juan Pablo, also joined him on this project, showcasing the remarkable intergenerational commitment to conservation.





It took every ounce of energy to set this nest and pole, but the volunteers were up for it and proud of the work accomplished at this site.

With impeccable timing, the nest project concluded just as a rainstorm engulfed the area. Seeking shelter from the rain at the lodge, the group relished a satisfying lunch together. Soon after, they gathered their belongings and embarked on a bus journey back to the vibrant city of San José, filled with fond memories of their time in Costa Rica.

The evening unfolded with a heartfelt farewell dinner, where laughter and camaraderie filled the air. The group savored the flavors of the local cuisine, cherishing the last moments spent together.

### **Final Thoughts - People, Place and Purpose**

This incredible group consisted of a diverse mix of volunteers embarking on their inaugural trip with ConservationVIP® along with several seasoned veterans who had previously volunteered on ConservationVIP® trips. Right from the very first orientation briefing on Day 1, a profound sense of camaraderie enveloped the group. At times, the group emotions were silently visible as they witnessed the extraordinary nature of this area, watched tiny hatchlings emerge from their shells and make their way towards the vast ocean. The sight of an Olive Ridley turtle laying her eggs left them in awe, and wonder; they found themselves immersed in the enchanting flutter of hummingbird wings, and even caught sight of a sloth leisurely making its way through the trees.

But it wasn't just the breathtaking wildlife encounters that touched them. It was the collective effort of tackling challenging conservation projects that truly uplifted each and every member of the group. They saw the immense impact their hard work resulted in, and there was a deeper understanding of the purpose of this trip. Reflecting on their experiences, it was playfully suggested adding "we make you cry" to the trip's description. This was not to imply sadness, but rather to capture the overwhelming tears of awe and joy shed by several as they bore witness to the most delicate and remarkable moments nature had to offer, and as they met remarkable individuals along the way.

### **Acknowledgments**

ConservationVIP® extends its heartfelt gratitude to all the dedicated volunteers who poured their heart and soul into ensuring the success of these projects. Special thanks go out to Costa Rica Sun Tours for orchestrating the intricate logistics of this unforgettable journey.

We cannot express enough appreciation to our exceptional guide, Alex Arias, whose knowledge and passion enhanced every moment of the trip. A special mention goes to our incredible bus driver, Sergio Miranda, who tirelessly worked alongside us, making our transportation seamless and safe, all while laboring with us throughout the projects.

The leaders of the Punta Banco Community Association, Thomas Koebling, Wilberth Vargas Guerrero, and Guillermo Baltodano Jiménez, deserve commendation for their invaluable support and guidance.

Furthermore, our gratitude extends to Eric Granados, the Project Manager of KABEK - Families

Pro Quetzal, for his unwavering dedication and commitment to protecting the environment.

Last but certainly not least, we want to express our deepest appreciation to the countless members of the Punta Banco community. Their warm hospitality, culinary expertise, and invaluable teachings enabled us to understand the importance of safeguarding this remarkable place. Their generosity in sharing their time and this extraordinary sanctuary with us is truly treasured.



*Alex Arias, Costa Rica Sun Tours Guide and  
Carol Clark, ConservationVIP Trip Leader*

**PURA VIDA!!**