

Volunteer Trip Report Pacuare, Costa Rica May 19 - 27, 2026



Costa Rica, Pacuare Volunteer Trip Report, May 2026, Sea Turtle Conservation at Pacuare Reserve and Resplendent Quetzal Conservation in Cerro de la Muerte

Executive Summary

In May 2026, Conservation Volunteers International Program (Conservation VIP®) led a volunteer conservation trip to Pacuare Reserve and Cerro de la Muerte in Costa Rica. Travelers participated in sea turtle conservation, leatherback turtle monitoring, primate research, sustainable construction projects, and resplendent quetzal conservation. During the nine-day program, participants contributed approximately 350 hours

supporting biodiversity conservation, scientific research, environmental education, and wildlife habitat enhancement.

The group consisted of nine individuals, including two trip leaders from ConservationVIP, Jim Upchurch and Diana Pena. Throughout the trip the group was accompanied by Marco Fallas, a local guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, who shared fascinating and comprehensive information on Costa Rica's history, geography, culture, and wildlife, while also participating in the hands-on volunteer activities. Additionally, Jose Solera, a skilled bus driver, provided safe transport for the group and lent a helping hand throughout much of the journey.

Overview of The Conservation Projects

The group's conservation projects focused on the protection of endangered leatherback sea turtles on the beaches of Pacuare Reserve, located on the central Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, three construction projects for staff at the Reserve, and conservation efforts for the resplendent quetzal birds in Cerro de la Muerte, located in the cloud forest region. The conservation initiatives were carried out in collaboration with Ecology Project International at the Pacuare Reserve and with the Paraiso Quetzal Lodge and the KABEK Association in Cerro de la Muerte. Wildlife experts from each organization provided educational instruction and guidance throughout the trip.

At the Pacuare Reserve, the leatherback sea turtle nesting season occurs from March to July and typically peaks between April and May. The ConservationVIP trip was planned in mid-May to maximize the group's chances of helping with both nesting sea turtles and newly hatched turtles. The group was fortunate to encounter two nesting leatherback sea turtles, which was an extraordinary experience for everyone involved. During the day, travelers helped build tables, a research structure, and a cane wall for researchers and volunteers who work at Pacuare throughout the year.

At Cerro de la Muerte, ConservationVIP travelers assisted with trail maintenance, construction of semiartificial nests for resplendent quetzals, and planting avocado trees, a main food source for the quetzal. Their efforts were instrumental in supporting the preservation and well-being of these magnificent birds. In total, the ConservationVIP group dedicated an impressive 350 volunteer hours to various service projects.

The country of Costa Rica is globally recognized as a leader for its efforts to protect and conserve biodiversity. Through their project activities, ConservationVIP travelers made a tangible and lasting impact on the ecosystems and wildlife they encountered in Costa Rica and became part of the worldwide community of people dedicated to safeguarding this unique place. Their efforts contributed to the conservation and restoration of vital

habitats, leaving behind a legacy that will benefit both the residents and the remarkable wildlife that call these areas home.

Detailed Trip Report and Accomplishments

Day 1: Meet in San Jose, Costa Rica

On the first day, participants met at the hotel for an introductory meeting and orientation to the volunteer projects planned for the days ahead at a group dinner. Marco Fallas, the knowledgeable guide from Costa Rica Sun Tours, joined in and shared valuable information that would make the trip a success. After everyone introduced themselves and shared their expectations the group discussed the itinerary, safety protocols and what the group could expect in the coming days.



Day 2: Journey to Pacuare Reserve



Early the next morning, the group gathered for breakfast in the hotel. Before boarding the bus, we met Jose, our driver, for the trip to Pacuare Reserve. During the ride Marco shared some of the history and consequences of large-scale banana, pineapple and palm oil production in Costa Rica. The group made several stops for restrooms, coffee, traditional cheese tortillas, and opportunities to stretch their legs and learn more about flora and fauna.

The ride was almost five hours to Goshen Dock. When we arrived, the group boarded a small, motorized boat for a short ride to Pacuare Reserve. During the boat ride, Marco pointed out various bird species.

Pacuare Reserve spans 1,700 acres and is home to more than 2,500 species. Founded in 1989, the reserve came under the management of Ecology Project International (EPI) in 2016. With EPI as steward, Pacuare remains a safe haven for vulnerable leatherback and other sea turtles, as well as many other species, including agami herons, jaguars, monkeys, and tree frogs.



The group arrived at Pacuare Reserve in time for lunch and had a chance to settle into their rooms before receiving an introductory presentation on Pacuare Reserve. Before

dinner, the group had the wonderful opportunity to witness the release of 36 baby leatherback sea turtles. Dinner was served in the dining facility where everyone meets to share dinner. After dinner, there was a short meeting to discuss the details of the night patrol walk. These walks occur at night because sea turtles come ashore to nest and lay their eggs after dark.

At 8:30 p.m., the group set out for a night patrol walk, accompanied by another 63 baby turtles to be released into the ocean by a research assistant from the Reserve. The walk was interrupted by a heavy rainstorm. Although heavy, the rain provided welcome relief from the tropical heat. The total distance walked that day was 1 ½ kilometers and the group returned to their rooms at 10:00pm.

Days 3 – 7: Sea Turtle Beach Patrols and Construction Projects in Pacuare Reserve

Our group was assigned three projects and divided into three teams. One team constructed a shelter and restored a wooden table for the researcher's use in evaluating and measuring the baby turtles prior to their release into the ocean. This project involved installing a new bamboo frame for the shelter and installing a weatherproof cover to allow researchers to conduct their tasks out of the weather.

The second team was responsible for the construction of a cane wall near the dining facility, to be used as an area to publish information and provide a separation from the general dining area. This project involved stripping bark from the cane, digging a foundation for the wall, building a frame for the cane to sit in and attaching the frame to the kitchen building.



The third group was responsible for the construction of five tables for the dining facility. Tasks included sanding the pieces that became part of the dining tables, and drilling, screwing and bolting the pieces together to form the finished tables.



The construction project coordinator for the Reserve, Eduardo Rangle, was very appreciative of the help we provided and was impressed by the number of tasks that the travelers accomplished.



Each afternoon, the group would participate in lectures about the research being conducted in the reserve. Our volunteer projects contributed to two of the research projects discussed - the primate and the sea turtle conservation programs.



Days were divided between the construction projects, lectures, and morning and night patrols. This included visits to the hatching and egg exhumation areas. The group was fortunate to sight two leatherback turtles laying eggs on the beach. The group provided support with collecting scientific data and transporting the eggs back to the hatchery. The group also participated in measuring baby leatherback sea turtles and releasing the baby turtles into the ocean.



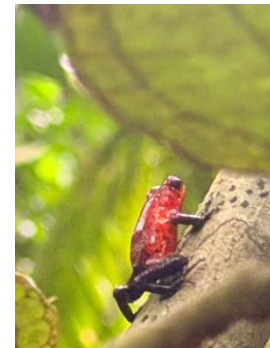
On Friday morning the group was up at 5:30 am to meet with Tess, the Reserve Primate Biologist, who had briefed us on her research on the Capuchin monkeys in the Reserve. There are three separate troops of monkeys within the Reserve that she is researching. After dividing into pairs, each group was given the task of observing the behavior of an individual Capuchin and recording the observations for later analysis. Because of the rapid movement of these monkeys, it was a challenging and interesting assignment.



The group also had the opportunity to visit the nesting area for the exotic and beautiful Agami heron, which nests nearby in the Reserve. The Agami Heron is an elusive bird that represents one of nature's most elegant wetland inhabitants. These magnificent herons spend most of the year along the edges of lagoons or streams, under the protective cover of dense vegetation. Their shy nature and preference for secluded habitats makes

them difficult to observe.

In total, the group walked approximately 20 kilometers during our beach patrols and on nature observation hikes. We experienced the wonderful sight of multiple monkeys, a sloth and baby sloth, birds, poison dart frogs with bright red, black and green colors, and lizards that looked as though they had emerged from a prehistoric era.



A special thank you dinner and cooking class was held on the final evening at Julio and Maritza's lodge, located a little way up the river. Maritza showed the group her art and how she makes jewelry. In the kitchen, Maritza taught the group how to cook an authentic Caribbean Costa Rican meal of coconut stewed chicken and 'patacones' fried mashed plantains. Everyone was assigned a task, and the space was quickly filled with laughter and joy.

Several members of the team at the Reserve were invited to attend the dinner and were recognized for their hard work with headlamps and ConservationVIP hats.



Day 8: Journey to Cerro de la Muerte

After an early breakfast, the group departed from the Reserve in a half-hour long covered boat ride. When we arrived at the Goshen Dock, Jose was waiting with a special treat, delicious, cold drinks. The group boarded the bus to the Cloud forest. Along the way, they stopped for bathroom breaks and lunch at a restaurant featuring a breathtaking view of the surrounding landscape.



After lunch, the group stopped off at the small, family-owned, Café Cristina plantation. The group learned about coffee bean cultivation and the roasting process, and bought coffee, chocolate bars and vanilla beans. They were also given organic bananas grown on the plantation.

The group arrived at the picturesque Paraiso Quetzal Lodge in Cerro de la Muerte in the late afternoon and checked in. The Lodge is located above 8,000 feet of elevation in the highlands of Costa Rica. It is a very beautiful place and the temperature is cool. The change from heat and humidity to cold weather was greatly appreciated by the travelers. Some gathered near the fireplace in the lodge before dinner while others spent their time enjoying and taking pictures of the many hummingbirds near the back deck of the lodge.

Day 9: Resplendent Quetzal Volunteer Projects at Cerro de la Muerte

Early in the morning the group was introduced to Jorge Serrano, the owner of Paraiso Quetzal Lodge and third-generation quetzal conservationist. Jorge explained that KABEK is the name for the quetzal in the local indigenous language. Jorge coordinates the various activities of the local KABEK

Association, which is dedicated to the conservation of the resplendent quetzal, a majestic colorful bird that holds significant cultural and ecological

importance for Latin American cultures. Members of the Association include private landowners, national parks, and reserves, who coordinate with the Costa Rica Wildlife Foundation on conservation activities for the quetzal.



Jorge led the group on a short hike to observe the birds. The travelers were grateful for having the opportunity to see a male and female resplendent quetzal tending their nest.

The group assisted with three main tasks: the construction of nest boxes, installing the boxes in suitable nesting habitat and planting 20 avocado trees. The purpose of these projects is to help the conservation of Quetzal. Building the nests guarantees a safe place for the Quetzal to nest. The avocado tree bears a small fruit that is the preferred food source of the resplendent quetzal.



The travelers enjoyed several delicious family-style meals together in the main dining area of Paraiso Quetzal Lodge, where they were able to watch the hummingbirds darting and hovering at the feeding stations outside the window.

To close out a wonderful day and trip, the group reflected on their experiences together over a farewell dinner in the lodge, then packed for an early morning departure for the airport in San Jose, where the trip concluded.

The ConservationVIP travelers completed **350 total volunteer hours**, including both Sea Turtle Conservation at Pacuare Reserve and Resplendent Quetzal Conservation in Cerro de la Muerte.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Costa Rica Sun Tours for orchestrating the intricate logistics of this unforgettable journey. We especially appreciated the support provided by our exceptional guide, Marco, who worked tirelessly to ensure we had a good experience.

Our incredible bus driver, Jose, made sure our transportation was safe and enjoyable, while also laboring with us throughout the projects.

We sincerely appreciate Ecology Project International at Pacuare Reserve for allowing us to participate in a meaningful way in their important sea turtle conservation work. The staff and biologists were remarkable at sharing knowledge and understanding of the work that goes on at the Reserve.

We thank Jorge and Paraiso Quetzal Lodge for including us in their dedication to conservation of the beautiful resplendent quetzal.

Finally, ConservationVIP extends its heartfelt gratitude to all the dedicated travelers who poured their energy, hearts and souls into ensuring the success of these projects. Through their efforts, the world is a better place.