

BACK TO MATAGALPA

By Nesen Naidoo

The Town of Drayton Valley, Alberta, was paired with the municipality of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, for a four-year project to help develop eco-tourism in the Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve park. The project was part of FCM's Municipal Partners for Economic Development program that was made possible with the financial support of Global Affairs Canada. Two and half years after the project ended, Canadian lead coordinator Nesen Naidoo had the opportunity to visit Matagalpa and check in on progress.



Tourism through nature

Nicaragua is blessed with numerous natural zones lush with native plants and fauna. Not quite untouched by human hands, but almost, tiny portions of these vast areas of wilderness sustain communities of farmers with small landholdings. The objective from 2011 to 2015 was to generate income from the Cerro Arenal reserve while preserving the environment and maintaining the land-based way of life for the park's residents.

Through exchanges, we shared our experiences working with different levels of government in boosting tourism through nature. In Drayton Valley, we hosted a delegation from Nicaragua and toured Jasper and other parks. Four of us from Drayton Valley went to Matagalpa to meet with a wide range of stakeholders and local representatives.

Everyone agreed our project had to support gender equality, poverty reduction, environmental awareness and protection, tourism and municipal governance. Our plans were ambitious, but four years later in 2015, our goals were realized with a demonstration project in the Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve.

Residents became excited about the initiatives when they realized they would benefit from additional income. Recreational activities compatible with the environment, like hiking and cycling, were organized to attract tourists. Residents adopted good farming practices including reforestation, soil and water enhancement, organic production and management of pests that threatened coffee plants. Seven plots were identified to support tourist activities, six tourist guides were trained, an

ecological studies program was initiated, a marketing plan developed, natural medicines promoted and tours of botanical gardens organized.

It was a great beginning. But I wondered as I left Matagalpa for what I thought was the last time if these early gains could be sustained. What did the future hold for the park residents, and would I ever see them again? Probably not.

I was wrong and glad of it!

I had the opportunity to return to the park in 2018, having recently become a participant in another capacity-building project nearby. Many of the same people were still involved. Not only were the early initiatives ongoing, there were further improvements, including infrastructure upgrades by the municipality. Among these were a six-kilometre paved road, sports arena enhancements including a fence and washrooms, and power-grid connection to the tourism centre building. It was clear Matagalpa and all levels of government had maintained keen interest in the park.

The flower show and bicycle tour which were developed to generate awareness about the park became much larger events. Now, farmers show their flowers weekly and are regular participants in an annual national fair. The previous annual cycling event is now held four times a year and attracts cyclists from all over Nicaragua. The quality and capacity of natural medicine enterprises were enhanced, too, as the national technological institute offers courses in production, packaging and sales. The institute is also providing training in pottery, astronomy and beauty.

The development of tourist accommodation within the park has occurred slowly, in recognition of the area’s environmental importance. Tourist accommodation outside the reserve boundaries is actively promoted though there is some hosting within the park by farmers. In conjunction with the Nicaragua tourism institute, tours are offered, promoting in-park business and educating visitors about the abundant natural resources. The tourism office which serves as a tourist information centre and education centre for residents may one day also provide accommodation.

From a governance perspective, I was pleased to see several government and educational organizations creating a local presence in support of income-generating activities. Importantly, a park management plan was developed to document policy and practices. These relate to fire prevention, permitted activities, protection of fauna and flora, land clearing, fertilizer use, water preservation and crop production. Additionally, the municipality is improving its budgeting process so funds can be better aligned with projects.

The local government and the Nicaraguan institute of agricultural technology have combined forces to offer continuing education on growing coffee, corn, rye, beans and vegetables. In this train-the-trainer endeavour, two farmers were provided information which they then pass on to others in the park. The goals are for the community to improve crop quality so crops are more marketable and to become a centre of farming knowledge.

There have been so many advancements, it’s impossible to document them all. Personally, the most gratifying for me are the individual successes experienced by farmers in the park. It is through their eyes that I most clearly saw the real-life impacts of the Matagalpa-Drayton Valley partnership.



As I listened to the residents, I realized that small opportunities — or at least what appear to be small opportunities by Canadian standards — can dramatically and positively transform lives. With a little technical and financial assistance, the residents have turned their mostly subsistence landholdings into marketable and profitable business ventures. These benefit not just themselves but their community as a whole.

That I played a role in these achievements is something I will cherish for the rest of my life. I am not the person I was back in 2011. My experiences in Nicaragua have changed me, for the better. Though I'm officially retired from municipal work now, I hope to continue sharing what I've learned so lives, including mine, continue to be enriched.



Key Observations

- Benefits are being shared well beyond the park boundaries. The municipality of Matagalpa is sharing their learnings and experience with other municipalities wanting to improve the way they preserve natural environments, work with farmers and partner with other levels of government.
- The local government in Matagalpa facilitated partnership with all key players: the park residents, the various levels of government and educational bodies. This was a major factor in the project's success, as it facilitated access to training and services, something landowners said was critical to their personal and business development.
- A key challenge in project management generally is getting partners focussed on realistic outcomes. This was certainly true in Nicaragua where there was a keen sense that much work must yet be done to improve people's lives.
- Continuity is essential in project management and helps to build trust. We were fortunate that Matagalpa's lead project coordinator remained the same from beginning to end.
- Seeing really is believing. Site visits were instrumental in improving understanding of how eco-tourism could be introduced to the park while enhancing the natural environment and improving the quality of life for residents.
- As is the case in Canada, activities often take longer than expected. This becomes even more critical when working in an unfamiliar country. For example, we often underestimated the time and resources needed for translation or to travel on the trails within the reserve's boundaries.
- Finally, this project would not have been possible without the cooperation of park residents. That cooperation was achieved by raising awareness about the benefits to them and by encouraging active learning.

References

https://fcm.ca/Documents/case-studies/International/2015/PARTNERSHIP_BETWEEN_MATAGALPA_AND_THE_TOWN_OF_DRAYTON_VALLEY_E.pdf

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES OF THE BENEFITS FROM THE MATAGALPA-DRAYTON VALLEY PARTNERSHIP

Maritza Sobalvarro, diversified farmer

Activities

- grows coffee, flowers and natural medicines
- participates in fairs to showcase his agricultural products
- participated in building a school

Benefits

- Children are educated in their own community.
- Others are encouraged to join Maritza in growing the local economy.

Ventura Roriguez, farmer and innovator

Activities

- partners with the Nicaragua tourism institute
- conserves soil, finds and adopts new composting methods, filters and recycles water
- built a food preparation centre and sells prepared food to tourists

Benefits

- Ventura has diversified and expanded sufficiently to generate a solid business profit. Now, he can pay for his own transportation costs rather than relying on government assistance.
- His on-farm practices protect the park's natural resources.

Maria de la Cruz Estrada, crop and fish farmer

Activities

- produces coffee, bananas and natural medicines
- recently added a pond to expand into aquaculture
- helped create the tourist and family committees

Benefits

- She is now able to make a decent living.
- She secured craft training for park residents, opening up the potential for yet another revenue stream.



Norma Andrea Rosales and Francisco Rosales, farm and small business owners

Norma's Activities

- built a solar dryer for herbal medicine plants
- sells her own baked goods during park events
- presented on natural medicines at the national fair in the country's capital

Francisco's Activities

- planted trees to conserve soil
- diversified farm to include flowers and natural medicines
- built a water reservoir

Benefits

- This husband and wife team's learnings in farm management, small business enterprise and environmental protection are shared with others. They are actively engaged in protecting the environment, encouraging others to do the same.



Martha Rosa Martinez, farmer, liqueur producer and former nurse

Activities

- brought three coffee-based liqueurs to market in partnership with two other people
- sells liqueur in the park to tourists
- participates in fairs, product promotions, media interviews
- has her eye on national and international retail distribution

Benefits

- Martha hopes to employ at least 10 women in a new production centre and wants to provide jobs to those with disabilities.
- The coffee used in her liqueur recipes comes only from the park, helping to grow the local economy.
- As her business expands, she will generate more jobs and possibly contribute to her nation's export earnings.



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