

PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MATAGALPA AND THE TOWN OF DRAYTON VALLEY

DEVELOPING THE EL ARENAL ECO-TOURISM CENTER

1. Project Scope

1.1. Summary

The municipality of Matagalpa created a project to strengthen the knowledge of the Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve stakeholders and promote the reserve location as a tourist destination, giving added value to existing products and services in the area. In this way, the project's goal is to improve the quality of life of local actors.

Project goals included improving promotion to the reserve as a tourist location, and increasing its recognition at local, national and international levels. In addition to environmental considerations, the project was aimed at promoting proper soil use and reducing pollution in the area's water resources. Since it is a nature reserve, the project also wanted to include conserving existing local forests in order to create value-added products. The project also sought to strengthen capacity building in the field of tourism, as well as recognize and conserve the area's natural resources.

1.2. Methodology

A significant aspect of this project was the use of a participatory approach with all the project actors through the application of the "Learning by doing" method. The participation of all the El Arenal Reserve communities in all the processes was instrumental in greater empowerment and achieving the project objectives. In other words, the promotion of community tourism locally and internationally was done in such a way that those most likely to benefit from tourism at the El Arenal Reserve were also involved in its promotion.

The project focused on three main components: production, tourism and environment. Activities for these three components were linked to the general project strategies.

1.3. Key partners and stakeholders

The project's main partners are also its beneficiaries (men and women). They developed the initiatives and implemented the necessary changes in the reserve area along with government institutions such as the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA), which was the governing institution for addressing environmental awareness. The Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism (INTUR) was in charge of strengthening tourism. The municipal technical team worked closely with project actors and

carried out activities. The Canadian municipality of Drayton Valley was in charge of monitoring and following up on each of the project activities, and the Association of Municipalities of Nicaragua (AMUNIC) provided support for all the planned activities, including budgets.

Men and women from the community and actors from the Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve were key project stakeholders. Small local farmers have the potential to become agents of local economic development (LED) by creating change and promoting initiatives such as accommodation, dining, hiking and similar activities on their lands.

2. Project outcomes

The municipal technical team was originally responsible for carrying out the project, since its multidisciplinary nature would lead to creative and efficient ways of making the project work. The Local Coordination Team was created and includes such participating members as: INTUR, the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG), the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MARENA), the Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism, universities, the Ministry of Health (MINSAL), the National Police, the Ministry of Family Economy, Communities, Cooperatives and Associations (MEFCCA) and the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education (MOE). Establishing a committee with the central government, the municipality and the community facilitated the creation



of linkages and the implementation of strong activities for achieving the project objectives.

A very significant project outcome was the implementation of good agricultural practices, including composting. Some of the environmentally-friendly agricultural practices used conserving soil and water, grafting plants, managing coffee plant pests and diseases, planning farming plots, building water reservoirs, reforestation, developing grey water treatment systems, managing orchid gardens, and developing and producing organic fertilizers and other organic products.

Benefiting community members participated in training sessions focused on tourism services and exchange of experience.

The project was also able to train six tourist guides for the Arenal Reserve on different basic themes (first aid, cultural heritage, local archeology and natural heritage) to serve tourists visiting this important natural attraction of Matagalpa.

In addition to identifying and developing seven productive plots for tourism purposes, the project also enabled the implementation of various ecological studies and the development of a marketing plan, as well as updating the Municipal Strategic Plan with a focus on small businesses.

The promotion of information on the El Arenal Reserve through different Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve media (radio, television and print) was considered essential for advancing tourism. To that end, the Centre for Environmental Management was refurbished and road access improved.

Strengths and weaknesses

Raising awareness among the main El Arenal Reserve stakeholders has been a major strength of the project. The “learning by doing” methodology, in which the community is empowered and its knowledge is strengthened to encourage active project participation, has been equally important. Another strength was the political will of Matagalpa’s municipal government and that of the central government of Nicaragua, which joined forces to ensure the project’s success.

One of the weaknesses at the start of the project has now been overcome by replacing the older agrochemical system with a non-polluting, environmentally-friendly system.

A slight weakness in the project fieldwork was occasional delays in attending to field activities. The delays were caused by such factors as long distances between communities and available transportation logistics. Nevertheless, this did not have a major impact on results.

Empowering local actors and beneficiaries to recognize the Reserve’s potential has affected results by strengthening their participation and actions. It has also been

helpful to have a consolidated team organizing what was needed for the project’s development.

2.2. Compatibility with the cross-cutting program objectives

The El Arenal Ecotourism Center project is compatible with the cross-cutting program objectives because of the evident participation in various training events (conferences, training exchanges and fairs). All actions and guidelines have complemented each other and been carried out within the demonstration project framework. Equal gender participation in all its projects and activities is part of the municipality of Matagalpa’s comprehensive strategy. Furthermore, since this project is of great importance to Matagalpa, it has made the protection and conservation of the environment — especially in a protected area such as the Cerro El Arenal — its main priority.

2.3. Success factors

Among project success factors is the extremely important activity of promoting awareness among the Cerro Arenal Nature Reserve’s actors and beneficiaries about existing natural resources and their protection. Promoting the sale of tourist services within the Reserve area and various advocacy and outreach activities have also been important.

Negative impacts on the El Arenal Reserve project were overcome by empowering the community.

2.4. Sustainability

Sustainability was a basic element in project design from inception. In organizational terms, this project has been made possible for the municipality of Matagalpa mainly thanks to good coordination between local and central governments and the commitment of area communities, which were actively involved in monitoring the project (institutions, tourism offices, local coordination committee, producers and tourism micro-businesses in Arenal).



The project developed a knowledge management component that empowered all stakeholders and strengthened their technical expertise. This resulted in their developing their own activities.

To ensure financial sustainability of the project, local actors and beneficiaries are committed to the development of the El Arenal Reserve, increasing productivity and creating new small businesses once the project donor withdraws. In addition, small producers have invested in remodeling and upgrading tourism services to attract all visitors, creating an inviting environment that has been adapted to the tastes and preferences of tourists.

The El Arenal Reserve project has been of great interest to the area residents because, in addition to their current economic activities, they now have an alternative for change that encompasses different social groups (youth, women, men, children, students and the general population). The project has been socially accepted because it has engendered an entrepreneurial vision with a focus on tourism and environmental protection.

The project has had a positive impact on production by switching from chemicals to organic farming practices, as well as in the use of water resources through the construction of reservoirs and the treatment of wastewater and other environmentally friendly activities.

3. The Experience

3.1. Lessons

This project experience provides an opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned during its implementation and to take a moment to provide feedback. In retrospect, some activities should have been handled differently.

The same participatory approach should be used with the community, but in another area where a similar

project can be carried out, such as another protected reserve that wants to expand its tourism activities.

Some of the lessons learned are teamwork with the local community, active reciprocal communication and learning about the work of each community member in its particular area of production.

Based on the project experience, any organization wishing to reproduce this project will need political will and the availability of financial and human resources. In addition, building strategic alliances is key to the process of involving the public and private sectors.

3.2. Best practices

The stakeholders of the Cerro Arenal Nature Reserve actions implemented rural community tourism (trails, hiking, natural medicine, lodging and tours of flower cultivation) with the help of the municipal government of Matagalpa. They promoted crop diversification and implemented an agro-ecological model (coffee, flowers, vegetables and medicinal plants being among the most common.)

Area actors carried out marketing of the Arenal Reserve. Local marketing initially focused on tours, proposals for activities such as creating accommodations in the area, developing an El Arenal Reserve marketing plan, participation by local producers in the area's fairs and experience exchanges.

3.3. Success stories

The owners of the *Corral*, *Aguas el arenal*, and *Bondad* farms have adopted the concept of rural community tourism through the exchange of successful experiences in similar areas supported by the municipal government, INTUR and MARENA. They have sparked an interest in expanding their vision of tourism and entrepreneurship (for example, hiking, lodging, dining, diversity of flower cultivation, etc.).



Appendices

- Ecological study document
- Marketing study document
- Five business plans (four farms and the *Roble* Management Center)
- The maps produced during the ecological study
- Brochures for training purposes
- Assessment of production and the environment
- Instructions for training tourist guides

The above documents are in the environmental management unit at the AMUNIC offices and the municipality of Matagalpa through the Office for small business services

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ANNEX 1: ACTUAL OUTCOMES

- Knowledge and technical training of municipal technical team
- Strengthened municipal technical team capacities in the field of production of university students
- Development of seven model farms (agriculture and tourism services)
- Participation of local coordination committee (with community members of the El Arenal natural reserve) in the different activities of the project
- Enhanced knowledge of 25 El Arenal farmers in environmental agricultural practices in developing production systems
- Development of five alternative best practices for conserving natural resources in the municipal science expo.
- Training of seven members of El Arenal and the Municipality of Matagalpa in developing and applying organic products in demonstration plots in order to reduce agrochemical use
- Training on waste management and in organic fertilizer production in order to have a revenue alternative
- Three exchanges of experience in production, tourism and environment.
- 11 technicians from municipalities with a diploma in Local Development with a focus on small businesses
- National and international recognition of Cerro Arenal Natural Reserve as a tourist destination
- Rehabilitation of three trails at the *Corral*, *Aguas el arenal* and *Bondad* farms
- Construction of six water reservoirs for better use of water resources
- Installation of two grey water treatment systems to reduce pollution of the reserve's main water sources
- Training of six tour guides with basic skills for providing services to tourists
- Completion of technical specialization courses on crafts, beauty and cooking through trade schools
- Creation and installation of eight signs signaling the borders of the protected areas
- Construction of a gateway at the entrance to the reserve
- Development of three study tools relating to ecology, marketing and updating the Strategic Plan with a focus on small businesses.