

An Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan for Soberania National Park, Panama



AN ECOTOURISM STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN FOR SOBERANIA NATIONAL PARK, PANAMA

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April 2003

USAID Education and Communication Program, Panama



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vision

Soberania National Park, through the implementation of this action plan, will be recognized as a world-class tourism destination and serve as a model for other parks nationally and internationally. By aligning outcome-based communications and interpretive planning with management goals, tourism will produce **sustainable benefits** for the environment, the park, businesses, locals, and visitors.

Sustainable Tourism in Panama and Soberania National Park

Panama is considered by many to be an undiscovered tourism destination and the “next best place.” Tourism is currently the third most important industry behind operation of the canal and the Colon free-trade zone. At this rate it will soon become the second largest contributor to Panama’s economy. Panama has been rated the safest Latin American destination for travelers from the USA. Panama could benefit from this trend if it positions itself as a safe tourism alternative.

Soberania National Park is a center of ecotourism and adventure tourism, both of which present a significant economic benefit. Strategically located in the center of the former canal zone, the park is probably the most accessible rainforest in the world and a superb destination for tourists interested in both natural and cultural attractions, including historic sites. In addition to being known as a world-class destination for birding, Soberania National Park contains the famous Camino de Cruces trail.

Due to the park’s location within the interoceanic region, there are multiple agencies with overlapping jurisdictions and numerous stakeholders. This will require carefully coordination and definition of roles through an inter-institutional committee for ecotourism, with the full participation of NGOs, tourism businesses, and communities.

Since this program is focused on Soberania National Park, it is appropriate that ANAM take lead responsibility, with technical and financial support from USAID. This does not mean that ANAM is responsible for doing all the work. ANAM’s primary responsibility is for managing and protecting the resources that provide the setting for sustainable tourism.

Outdoor recreation and international tourism in national parks, if done correctly, is one of the best ways to develop support for protected areas and the resources they contain. However, parks without strong public support will fail. Because entrance fees go to the national treasury, Soberania National Park does not benefit directly from increased visitation. However, it can receive indirect benefits from a sustainable tourism program through agreements and partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, and other government institutions.

Recommended Elements of the Strategy

- Focus on *benefits* as desired outcomes.
- Create synergy between conservation/biodiversity, economic development, and quality visitor experiences.
- Develop public-private partnerships between the park and the private sector.
- Work closely with IPAT and the tourism industry with all action items.
- Involve all stakeholders through an inter-institutional committee for participatory development of ecotourism and through the Limits of Acceptable Change methodology for dealing with visitor impacts (NGOs, communities, other institutions, etc.)
- Support ANAM as the lead agency, with assistance from USAID.
- Focus on Soberania National Park but don't overlook important linkages with other parks and tourist attractions outside the park.
- Develop strategic planning for interpretation and communication to achieve the three primary goals and help guide other key action items.
- Emphasize actions that are financially self-sustainable and leverage additional monies.

Recommended Action Items for 2003 - 2006

- 1) **Interpretation, Communication and Identity.** Prepare an interpretive/strategic communication plan, with stakeholder input. Define goals, outcomes, target audiences, thematic messages, and conceptual media and program products for guided and self-guided tours. This will include defining appropriate niche markets and development of an image for promoting the park as an ecotourism destination with a high-quality environment.
- 2) **Special Promotional Event.** Celebrate Panama's Centennial with a familiarization tour for travel writers and photographers and produce articles and a press kit to highlight the park's world-class attractions and promote the park as an ecotourism destination.
- 3) **Promotional Materials.** Design an integrated "family" of brochures, banners, flyers, maps, posters, and postcards to advertise the park. Produce a small set of

these items to generate support and immediate visibility for the park's ecotourism program.

- 4) **Bird Trail Map**. Finalize, design and produce the first edition of a Bird Trail map with Audubon for sale to the public. The profits will be used by the Audubon Society to reprint the map and to assist the park with its environmental education programs.
- 5) **Training**. Conduct training in interpretation, ecotourism and English for guides and LAC, ecotourism, tourism management, and concessions for ANAM.
- 6) **Ecotourism Committee**. Provide technical assistance and administrative support for the development of an inter-institutional committee for ecotourism, with stakeholders from NGOs, tourism businesses, and communities.
- 7) **Tourism Packages**. Develop new routes and information that promote sustainable tourism and connect communities via biking, boats, cars, and the railroad.
- 8) **Venta de Cruces and Camino de Cruces**. Develop a pilot project involving all stakeholders to enhance these world-class historic resources as a sustainable tourism attraction, produce economic benefits, and increase the quality of the visitor experience through interpretation.
- 9) **Standards and Guidelines**. Develop a sustainable tourism methodology for proposed concession trail developments at Pipeline Road and Plantation Road based on international standards and approaches and input from local stakeholders through the LAC methodology. Require the private sector proponents to develop and conduct planning and LAC monitoring, with oversight by ANAM, inter-institutional coordination through an ecotourism committee, and technical assistance through USAID.
- 10) **Infrastructure Improvements**. Explore opportunities for private sector alliance to improve and maintain park infrastructure for visitors. For example, parking, bathrooms, water, signage, and to improve trails. Produce an illustrated catalog of projects and market it to potential donors through the ecotourism committee.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Since its beginning in 1998, USAID's Communication and Education Program has promoted ecotourism in the protected areas of the Panama Canal Watershed as one of its primary objectives. It has initiated a variety of activities related to this goal, such as:

- Promoting the watershed as an ecotourism destination
- Conducting market research to determine consumer demand for ecotourism and the ability of businesses to meet that demand
- Training tourist guides
- Producing informational materials for tourists about national parks located within the watershed
- Developing signage plans for national parks
- Supporting the production of materials on ecotourism activities for local NGOs and communities
- Providing ecotourism technical assistance to traditional village communities.

In addition, at the end of 2002 a strategic plan for managing the protected areas of the watershed was formulated in which ANAM identified ecotourism as a vital component for ensuring the financial sustainability of the protected areas and declared its support for the national ecotourism strategy that Panama is presenting to both national and international audiences.

USAID has concentrated its technical assistance in Panama on implementing pilot projects that serve as testing grounds for sustainable watershed management strategies. In keeping with this approach, one of USAID and ANAM's most important proposals is a pilot ecotourism project in Soberania National Park that utilizes all of the interventions necessary for the park to meet international standards and methods of ecotourism management. In planning ecotourism activities for Soberania, one of the key methodologies will be the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) to ensure resource protection and a quality visitor experience.

ANAM is interested in developing a framework for ecotourism development in the protected areas because ecotourism will contribute to the financial sustainability of both the protected areas and local communities. Nevertheless, it does not want lack of adequate planning in the face of growing tourism demand to cause deterioration of the park's natural and historic resources. Because of its resources and strategic location, Soberania National Park is a center of ecotourism and adventure tourism, both of which present a significant economic benefit.

Because entrance fees go to the national treasury, Soberania National Park does not benefit directly from increased visitation. However, it can receive indirect benefits from

a sustainable tourism program through agreements and partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, and other government institutions.

1.2 Objective

The objective of this pilot project is to design an ecotourism action plan for Soberania National Park that is based primarily on previous research and planning efforts. This plan will develop a framework and identify a series of activities to undertake during the course of three years, especially ones that coincide with Panama's centennial celebration and therefore raise the profile of the park both nationally and internationally. This approach will be used as a model for other parks.

1.3 Methodology

USAID has developed this plan through its Education and Communication Program in close collaboration with ANAM staff as well as with interested environmental NGOs, communities, and representatives of government agencies such as IPAT (Panama Tourism Bureau), INAC (Bureau of National Culture), and ARI (Interoceanic Regional Authority).

There were several key sources of information used in the development of this plan:

- Interviews of 4 NGOs, 4 institutions and 3 tour operators
- Analysis of key documents
- Field review of principal attractions
- Meetings with ANAM Natural Patrimony staff

The interviews were conducted by phone and in person during the month of February and the remainder of the work was accomplished March 8-21, 2003. In addition, a workshop on the LAC methodology was presented for ANAM staff.

Published Reports Reviewed

- **Soberania National Park Master Plan** (2000 Draft)
- **Community Based Ecotourism in the Panama Canal Watershed** (Lumpkin 1998)
- **Ecotourism and Recreation in the Panam Canal Watershed** (Wylie and Bedwell 2000)
- **Profile of Tourists in Panama Canal Watershed Protected Areas and Panama Tour Operators Study** (Ham and Weiler 2000)
- **Sign Plan for Soberania National Park** (Loste, Mattson, Villalvazo and Wylie 2000)
- **IPAT Tourism Development Master Plan for Panama, 1993-2002** (GOP 1993)
- **ARI Sustainable Tourism Plan for Gamboa Administrative Area** (Herndon and Vega 1997)

People Interviewed

Tour Operators

- Alexis Flores, Gamboa Rainforest Resort
- Nelson Morales, ecotourism guide
- Ernesto Orillac, EcoMargo Tours

NGOs

- Lider Sucre, Executive Director ANCON
- Yolanda Jimenez, Fundacion Natura
- Angel Muela, Peregrine Fund
- Rosabel Miro, Audubon Society

Institutions

- Dinise Ramos, IPAT
- Daria Picota, INAC
- Erika Espino, SENACYT
- Luis Alberto Puleyo, Summit Park

2.0 VISION AND STRATEGY

2.1 Vision

Our vision is that Soberania National Park, through the implementation of this action plan, will be recognized as a world-class tourism destination and serve as a model for other parks nationally and internationally. By aligning outcome-based communications and interpretive planning with management goals, tourism will produce **sustainable benefits** for the environment, the park, businesses, locals, and visitors.

2.2 Strategy

The strategy for developing sustainable tourism for Soberania National Park is simple. By aligning outcome-based communications and interpretive planning with management goals, tourism will produce sustainable **benefits** for the environment, the park, businesses, locals, and visitors. This approach has three primary elements or goals that are inter-related and reinforce each other: Conservation/Biodiversity, Economic development, and Quality visitor experiences.



Conservation relates to the overall health of the environment, as measured by biodiversity and preservation of historic sites such as the Camino de Cruces. This also provides the high-quality setting for recreation and tourism. Another major conservation benefit is the production of fresh water for drinking and operation of the Panama Canal.

Economic Development concerns the business of outdoor recreation and tourism in the park. Sustainable recreation and tourism programs will build support for conservation and for the management of protected areas.

Quality Visitor Experiences depend on properly managed settings and attractions (including scenery), professional tourism services and infrastructure, and adequate visitor information and interpretation. Quality visitor experiences are the foundation for successful recreation and tourism. Therefore, the first step, a strategic master plan for interpretation, communication and identity, is crucial because it enhances the visitor experience. Without a quality visitor experience and public programs carefully linked to management goals, there will be no sustainable tourism business and no support for the park or for conservation.

2.3 Benefits of Recreation and Tourism

With proper planning, sustainable tourism can produce benefits for visitors, local residents, businesses, managing agencies, and the resource base upon which tourism depends. These include:

- Rural economic development and diversification
- Generating revenues and public support for protected areas
- Jobs, profits, taxes, and balance of foreign payments (foreign revenue)
- Resource conservation and environmental protection
- Community pride and opportunity for locals to share their culture
- Learning about other people and places (two-way)
- Raising local awareness about the value of natural and cultural resources
- Psychological health and physical fitness
- Environmental education
- Entertainment and fun

In addition, marketing and educational programs can also be effective in generating benefits. Interpretive programs can help reduce the costs of vandalism, resource damage, and litter. Effective advertising can de-market over-used areas and distribute economic benefits to rural communities. Marketing programs can also be developed to attract certain types of desirable customers; for example, those interested in cultural heritage or birdwatchers, who tend to stay longer and spend more than other tourists.

2.4 Strategic Linkages

In today's world everything is becoming connected. Therefore, we must learn to think beyond the boundaries of the Soberania National Park, Panama or Central America and to tie local actions to larger frameworks to leverage efforts and maximize benefits. The Mesoamerican Trails project is one example. It would connect national parks and support ecotourism throughout the region through a regional "biodiversity" theme and serve as a powerful tool for marketing and environmental education. Pilot projects in the park and in the Panama Canal Watershed could demonstrate the benefits of such trails and move Panama to center stage in international ecotourism. In particular, "water trails" in lakes and rivers is one area where Panama could take the lead. Another trail concept would be a trans-isthmian historic theme following the route of the Camino de Cruces/Chagres River, the transcontinental railroad, and of course the Panama Canal.

People seldom come to visit a "park." A park is too big and too artificial. Visitors may not even know which protected area they are in. It doesn't matter to them. They come to enjoy specific attractions within a park, such as El Charco or Canopy Tower, and they usually visit multiple attractions in a single trip. Therefore, it is important to understand how people actually travel and not overlook important linkages with other parks and tourist attractions outside the park.

3.0 RECREATION AND TOURISM

3.1 The Significance of Recreation and Tourism

Outdoor recreation and tourism is a growth industry and an important strategic issue for Panama because it represents significant risks and opportunities.

As the world's largest industry, it cannot be ignored. More and more international visitors are coming to Panama and more Panamanians are discovering their national parks every day. Outdoor recreation and international tourism in national parks, if done correctly, is one of the best ways to develop support for these protected areas and the resources they contain. Healthy national parks will ensure biodiversity, protect against erosion, provide freshwater supplies, and help meet the growing demand for quality recreation and tourism opportunities. However, parks without strong public support will fail.

In order to achieve its natural resource goals in Panama, ANAM must understand this industry and begin to play a more active role in managing and shaping it. With proper planning, recreation and tourism programs can be an effective tool to achieve ANAM's management goals.

3.2 Key Definitions and Concepts

3.2.1 The Tourism Industry

The tourism “industry” is actually a complex set of inter-related industries such as transportation, food, lodging, tour agencies, etc. Its basic components include: visitors, attractions, services, host communities, information, and infrastructure. There is a “supply side” which includes attractions, such as national parks and their management - sometimes referred to as “inputs.” On the “demand side” there are what visitors do and want and the experiences they have – or in other words “outcomes.”

Tourism is about moving people from place to place, providing them the services and experiences they desire and, hopefully, producing benefits for local residents, visitors, and the environment.

The distinction is sometimes made between “specialty” and “mass-tourism,” implying that the former is somehow more environmentally-friendly because it is based on natural and cultural resources rather than on the built environment, such as high-rise hotels and golf courses. However, this may be a misleading dichotomy. Some tourism specialists argue that there is no such thing as “specialty travel” because if you look close enough, each trip is different on some level and when you put them all together the various specialty trips add up to mass travel.

Furthermore, even the most dedicated nature traveler becomes a “mass-tourist” at some stage of their trip, and many large hotels, airlines, and even golf courses have developed “green” programs to educate their customers and lessen their impact on the environment. The important distinction, therefore, is not scale or natural versus manmade, but rather the impacts and benefits of a particular tourism program. The point is to minimize impacts and costs and maximize benefits.

3.2.2 Ecotourism

There are many definitions of ecotourism and this can cause confusion, especially when it is lumped with “nature tourism.” Ecotourism can focus on nature, but all nature tourism is not ecotourism. The difficulty with ecotourism is that it can be viewed at different levels.

Defined narrowly, ecotourism is a specialized niche of nature travel that focuses on low-impact travel to pristine areas, promoted primarily by environmental organizations as a tool for conservation in Third-world countries. Education and cultural attractions are also important defining elements for some. A broader perspective views ecotourism as a **philosophy** of travel that respects the land, people and culture, a **strategy** of using sustainable tourism as a tool for both conservation and economic development, and a set of **goals and principles** which can apply to all forms of travel, even “mass tourism.”

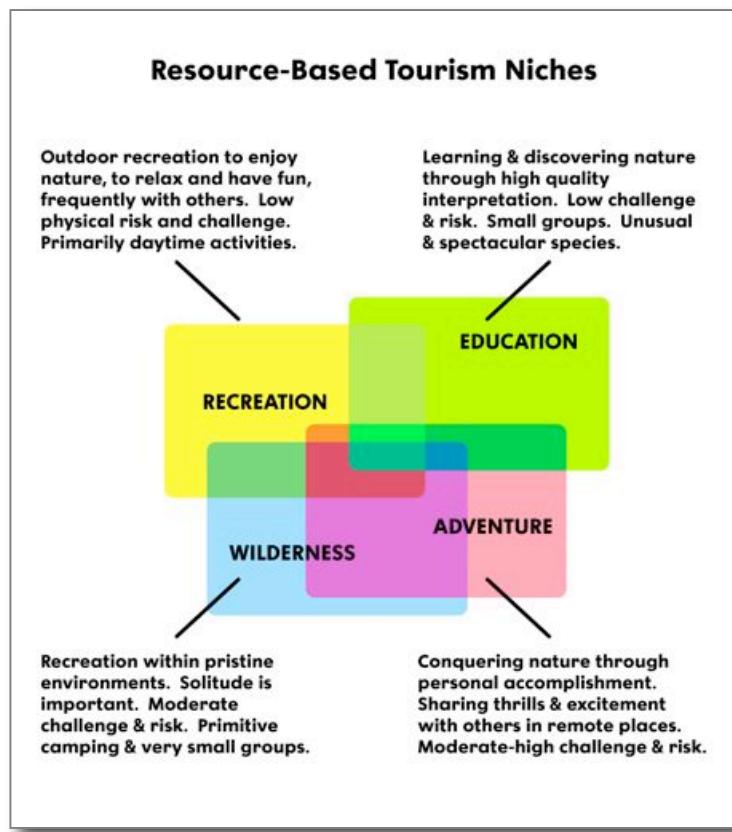
Keep in mind that there is no such thing as a 100% ecotourist. Even hard-core ecotourists may also be interested in cultural and historic attractions, visit large cities, fly in wide-body jets and stay in fancy hotels during some part of their trip. It is more appropriate to think of tourism as an integrated system that includes both large scale “mass tourism” and small scale “ecotourism” or other specialty niches. Travelers flow through this system, spending more or less time in large and small scale situations.

3.2.3 Recreation versus Tourism

Although closely related and frequently used interchangeably, recreation and tourism are not synonymous. They are more like two ends of a continuum. There is some overlap, but generally things belong more in one category than the other. Tourism is the “business of recreation” and is commonly considered to involve travel away from home and an overnight stay, whereas recreation is a wide range of outdoor activities. And although the activities they engage in may be identical, local residents are usually thought of as recreationists rather than tourists.

3.2.4 Niche Markets

Tourism markets can be segregated based on geography (North America, Europe...), recreational activities (scuba diving, fishing...), demographics and lifestyle (seniors, gay, family...), business/convention, visiting friends and relatives, group/package tour, independent travelers, etc. The possibilities are nearly endless.



A simple model for resource-based travel includes four overlapping categories based on psychographics (motivations), demographics, and associated activities: **Recreation**, **Wilderness**, **Adventure**, and **Education**. These four niches can be viewed as primary types; they can stand alone or be combined to form different mixes and each can have “hard” or “soft” forms. Various combinations will provide the package of experiences and personal benefits desired. A single trip may involve elements from all four at different times and places or by different people at the same time.

3.3 Global Trends in Tourism

There are several tourism trends that may affect Panama:

1. Global industrialization, pollution, deforestation and species extinction will increase the desire to escape to simpler, untrammeled places, stimulate nature-based travel and demands on protected areas and increase the desire to experience “last frontiers” and species before they are gone (Nickerson and Uysal 1995).
2. Urbanization and growth of the middle class in developing countries will increase the desire and ability to travel, stimulate a search for authentic local culture, promote interest for cultural roots and connections in other countries, and spur a desire to escape work stress (Nickerson and Uysal 1995).

3. In the United States, travelers want more life-enriching vacations, Americans are getting older, more people are traveling with children, travelers have less time and are more stressed, driving people to look for stress relief, convenience, and shorter vacations closer to home (Mass 1995).
4. The Internet revolution is dramatically changing the way travelers obtain information on a destination, plan their travel, and purchase products.
5. Multi-activity vacations combining several sports - such as kayaking and mountain biking - are becoming more popular.
6. Sun and beach tourism will continue to comprise most of the tourism in the Americas, but as part of a more complex and participatory package that includes environmental and cultural elements (TCR 1999:132).
7. The threat of terrorism has had a chilling effect on international travel since September 11, 2001. Fortunately, Panama has been rated the safest Latin American destination for travelers from the USA. Panama could benefit from this trend if it positions itself as a safe alternative.

3.4 Tourism in Panama

Panama is considered by many to be an undiscovered tourism destination and the “next best place.” Panama’s National Tourism Bureau (IPAT) has identified 1,300 tourism attractions, mostly natural resources (72%), including 2,000 kilometers of beach along both coasts, more than 1,000 islands and 25 national parks. There were a total of 548,000 visitors in 1998, an increase of 8.7% over 1997. But compared to other similar destinations in Central America and the Caribbean, this is very low. Eighty per cent were business travelers, and only 16% were leisure. IPAT’s target for the year 2000 was 600,000 visitors.

Detailed and up-to-date tourism statistics for Panama are not easy to obtain. Our primary source was a 1993 summary of the Tourism Development Master Plan for Panama which covered the period 1993-2002. Although dated, this is probably a good indicator of the general composition of Panama’s tourism industry today.

According to the 1993 plan, the primary markets for international visitors at that time included the USA (16%), Costa Rica (14%), Colombia (13%), Dominican Republic (10%), Ecuador (7%), Europe (7%), Venezuela (6%), and Nicaragua (6%). Almost half of the visitors from the USA came to Panama on leisure trips, most visited Panama City, and relatively few traveled to locations in the country’s interior. Most tourists came to Panama to purchase imported goods which they re-exported to their own countries. On the other hand, Panama’s domestic tourism market in the early 1990s was nearly twice that of its inbound tourism. Further, most of the trips to the interior were made by domestic travelers (GOP 1993:21).

In 1993, the contribution of tourism to Panama's economy was estimated to range from 5% to 11% GDP, based on two methods of calculation. Each foreign tourist contributed between US\$ 1,000-2,000. The approximately US\$ 200,000,000 in revenue they generated in 1991 represented about 2-3% of total foreign exchange from exports. In 1992, tourist activities generated 12,510 direct jobs and 31,275 indirect jobs, for a total of 43,785. This was about 3% (direct) and 7% (indirect) of the country's total jobs (GOP 1993:27-29).

Over the past decade, annual tourism growth has averaged 12%. Tourism is currently the third most important industry behind operation of the canal and the Colon free-trade zone. At this rate it will soon become the second largest contributor to Panama's economy. IPAT's strategic plan acknowledged that Panama had a serious image problem in markets such as the USA. Despite a new international advertising campaign, this situation is largely unchanged. Any knowledge that US citizens have about Panama is superficial and the country is virtually unknown in the Canadian market.

4.0 CURRENT SITUATION IN SOBERANIA NATIONAL PARK

4.1 Visitation

Information on the level and type of recreation and tourism in the park is limited but does provide a general picture of current use. According to records kept at the park headquarters and at Canopy Tower, there were a total of 3,802 visitors in 2002. Of this number, 2,285 were Panamanians and 1,581 were foreign travelers. Of the 205 who registered by country, 189 were from Europe, 94 from the USA, 29 from South America, and 14 from Canada. Obviously, many more Panamanians and international visitors fail to register and we believe this is only part of the total use of the park.

If this sample is representative, then the majority of park users were Panamanians (60%) who probably came during the day. Of the foreign visitors, most (56%) were from Europe, followed by the USA (29%), South America (9%) and Canada (4%). However, until better data are available, these estimates should be used with caution. Clearly, use of the most popular site in the park, the swimming and picnic area at El Charco, by residents of Panama City was not carefully monitored and these numbers are not included.

4.2 SWOT Rapid Assessment

A rapid assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the park was prepared and discussed at the LAC workshop with ANAM staff March 19, 2003. These results are presented below. The recommended action items in this plan were selected to take advantage of the strengths and opportunities and respond to the weaknesses and threats.

SWOT Rapid Assessment of Soberania National Park

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Natural & Cultural Resources Superb access Well known for birding (Pipeline Rd & Canopy Tower) Long term scientific research (STRI) Biological & historical corridor	Limited recreational opportunities Multiple agency jurisdictions Lack of tourism standards Limited visitor interpretation Limited visitor information
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Panama's centennial celebration Water recreation Adventure tourism Wilderness tourism Educational travel Cruise ship tourism Railroad passengers Bicycling	Hunting Visitor security Uncontrolled development Water pollution

The primary strengths of the park are its rich natural and cultural resources and easy access from Panama City and Colon. However, its reputation as a world-class birding destination can also be viewed as a weakness if the park only attracts and serves this one niche market and ignores its broader resource base. Another major weakness is the park's limited visitor information and interpretation.

There are many opportunities for the park to develop a wider range of recreational and tourism programs, including information and interpretation for railroad and cruise ship passengers and water-based activities on Lake Gatun and the middle Chagres River. Of the relatively few threats to recreation and tourism, visitor security is perhaps the most important. Negative publicity from just one serious incident could seriously impact the international market.

Another weakness or challenge is the many agencies and stakeholders which may be involved and interested in ecotourism within Soberania National Park. The major players are listed below.

Institutions and Stakeholders in Ecotourism

Canopy Tower - Bird watching resort, ARI concession.

Gamboa Rainforest Resort - ARI concession.

ARI – Responsible for all reverted infrastructure ; e.g., Pipeline Road.

ACP – Responsible for watershed, water ways, and the Canal and permission for any development or use of these water ways including Gatun Lake.

IPAT – National promotion and ecotourism strategy.

INAC – Responsible for historic sites and artifacts, including permission to use or develop Venta de Cruces and Camino de Cruces.

STRI – Involved with scientific research within the park and the use of Gamboa village.

Gamboa village – Under the administration of ARI and being studied for international designation as a cultural landscape.

Limon – Potential gateway community on the northeastern end of the park, with ANAM facility.

Santa Rosa y Guayabalito – Communities along the middle Chagres River with ecotourism programs and a nature trail within the park.

San Antonio – Embera village with potential for ecotourism, whose inhabitants sell handicrafts at Gamboa Rainforest Resort.

4.3 Recreational Opportunity Spectrum

The Recreational opportunity spectrum (ROS) for Soberania National Park indicates the diversity of settings in which recreation and tourism can take place. Greater diversity of setting is desirable because it gives the public more choices. It also provides more opportunities for the private sector to develop financially sustainable tourism programs.

The table below summarizes the ROS for Soberania National Park. It shows that the primary activities are limited to a relatively few sites. This is primarily birding and wildlife viewing at Canopy Tower and along the Pipeline Road, as well as picnicking and

swimming at El Charco. These activities take place in natural and semi-primitive settings at well developed facilities and along roadways. There is relatively little public use of the park's extensive waterways or more primitive trails.

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum for Soberania National Park

CURRENT ACTIVITIES	RECREATIONAL SETTINGS					
	Resort	Developed Recreation Site	Paved Roads in Natural Setting	Semi-primitive Non-motorized	Semi-primitive Motorized	Primitive Trails
Birding/Wildlife Viewing	(1)		(1)	(5)	(7)	(12)
Picnicking		(2)	(11)			
Boating/Fishing					(8)	
Swimming		(2)				
Mountain Biking			(4)	(5)	(7)	
Road Biking			(4)			
Hiking		(2)		(2) (5)		(6)
Sightseeing	(13)		(3) (4)		(9)	
Overnight Lodging	(1)					
Visit Historic Sites			(11)	(10)		(6)

Key: [Highlighted sites currently receive most use.]

- (1) Canopy tower
- (2) El Charco picnic area and trails
- (3) Madden Highway
- (4) Gaillard Highway
- (5) Plantation Road trail
- (6) Camino de Cruces trail
- (7) Pipeline Road
- (8) Middle Chagres River
- (9) Transisthmian Railroad
- (10) Venta de Cruces historic townsite
- (11) Camino de Cruces picnic area on Madden Highway
- (12) El Palmar nature trail operated by the community of Santa Rosa
- (13) Gamboa Resort observation tower

5.0 OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Interpretation and Communication

Soberania National Park is probably the most accessible rainforest in the world. But it is not enough to just provide an attractive setting for recreation and tourism. The significance of the park and its resources can only be understood by visitors, and the full benefits can only be achieved, if the park is interpreted properly and if key messages are carefully coordinated and communicated through the proper media.

The interpretive kiosks designed for the headquarters and four trail entrances are a good start. However, **a master plan for interpretation and communication is needed** to define overall goals, outcomes, target audiences, thematic messages, and conceptual media and program products for guided and self-guided tours throughout the park.

5.2 Marketing the Park

In the business world, marketing is knowing who your customers are, or who your potential customers *could* be, what they want, what you have to offer, and how to attract them. Currently, there is very little systematic and coordinated marketing research, planning, or promotion of the park as a recreational or international tourism destination by ANAM. There is also no unique identity or logo that distinguishes Soberania from other parks or tourism destinations.

Several related actions are recommended for marketing the park. A **park image** would define appropriate markets and develop an image for promoting Soberania as an ecotourism destination. A **familiarization tour for travel writers, press kit, and set of promotional materials, including a bird trail map**, would promote the park as an ecotourism destination.



Example of a park logo from Nicaragua

Possible Promotional Materials

- Banners
- Flyers
- Brochures
- Inexpensive park maps
- Website information
- Airport posters
- Postcards
- Bird trail map

There are two options for a familiarization tour. One would be a trans-isthmian route from Panama City to Fort San Lorenzo, passing through Soberania National Park via the Camino de Cruces. Historic and biological connections would be the focus, with the park as the centerpiece of these linkages. The second option would feature the Chagres River, from the Embera villages above Lake Alajuela to the middle Chagres including Gamboa Rainforest Resort and the Venta de Cruces townsite, and then shifting to the water route across Lake Gatun and down the river to the Caribbean coast. This would feature existing ecotourism attractions and community-based programs in and around the park.

Elements of a Press Kit

- **Description of Soberania National Park**
- **Fact sheet**
- **Key attractions**
- **Maps and brochures**
- **Contact information**
- **Editorial leads for possible stories**
- **Press release (generic text)**
- **Sample photographs on CD**

5.3 Training

Another important element of a world-class tourism program is training. This ensures the ability of managers, concessionaires, and tour operators to manage and deliver the right services to achieve conservation, economic development, and quality visitor experiences. In the past four years there has been training for guides, interpretation, and partnerships, community-based tourism, and publications. But more is needed. For example, many visitors do not even know that they are in the Soberania National Park or do not understand why the park is significant. Also, most visitors to Gamboa Rainforest Resort do not know that they are overlooking one of the world's most important historic routes.

We recommend several types of training in 2004 and 2005, including:

- **Interpretive guide training** for companies offering tours on the park would enhance the visitor experience, ensure accuracy, and align messages with park management goals.
- A workshop on **Limits of Acceptable Change** methodology to deal with visitor impacts.
- A workshop on **ecotourism management** for ANAM personnel.
- A 3-month, intensive training program for **interpretive guides and English skills** has been recommended for funding by the RARE Center for Tropical Conservation and is seeking funding.
- A **study tour to the USA** for government personnel to observe and interact with their counterparts in recreation management, concessions, interpretation, and trails development.

5.4 Diversifying the Park’s Recreation and Tourism Opportunities

Other than recreational day use by Panamanians at El Charco, the focus of recreation and tourism in the park is on bird watching at a few key locations. This is based primarily on road access to settings that appear to be natural. There is relatively little recreation or commercial tour activity along the waterways or in more primitive settings. Further, most of the people who transit the park along the two main paved roads may not know they are in a protected area and are largely unaware of other recreational opportunities.

It is important, therefore, that **more routes, tour packages and information be developed to expand recreational opportunities** in a wide range of settings throughout the park. Wherever possible, these should connect communities to provide economic benefits for rural residents. Routes could include a trans-isthmian heritage corridor involving the Canal, Camino de Cruces, the historic railroad; a water trail on the Middle Chagres and on the northwestern end of the park around the community of Limon; designation, signage, and interpretation of the two paved roads as “scenic highways;” and development of special interpretive materials for railroad and cruise ship passengers.

5.5 The Importance of Cultural Heritage

When dealing with world-class natural resources, it is sometimes easy to overlook equally important cultural heritage values, such as prehistoric sites, Spanish Colonial towns and historic roads, cultural landscapes, and traditional indigenous cultures. What is ordinary to locals is frequently extraordinary to international visitors and even simple things like a farmer’s market or a ride in an indigenous canoe can be a tourism attraction.

The public’s demand for life-enhancing travel and interpretive programs is exploding, and visiting cultural sites is becoming as popular as traditional outdoor recreational activities. One of the hottest trends in tourism today is travel that combines cultural attractions with the outdoors and learning. Therefore, it is important to include cultural sites and activities in future tourism and recreation programs.

Therefore, **we recommend a broad set of activities for the park’s key historic attractions, the Venta de Cruces townsite and associated Camino de Cruces.** These include basic survey and mapping to locate and identify key features and development of an archeological/interpretive plan involving all stakeholders. Temporary interpretive materials should be immediately developed for use on-site and at Gamboa Rainforest Resort, followed by permanent interpretive panels and a kiosk. The use of paying volunteers to assist with the fieldwork should also be explored (e.g. Earthwatch).

In addition, Soberania National Park is strategically located in the center of an incredibly rich heritage corridor that stretches across the isthmus from the Pacific to the Caribbean. At different times various routes crossed the park by mule, canoe, train, and ocean-going ships, each with its own unique story. These routes connect the country’s most important historic sites, Panama City, the first European settlement on the Pacific Coast, and the historic towns and forts on the Caribbean side. Evidence of the Spanish Colonial and

American period architecture can be appreciated throughout this corridor, some of which are recognized internationally as World Heritage Sites. Others, such as the Gamboa village, built in the 1930-40s, are also important parts of the cultural landscape.

5.6 Tourism Partnerships

There is never enough money to do everything necessary for the management and protection of parks and protected areas. Therefore, **partnerships must be developed with recreation and tourism service providers in the private sector**. They become a major part of the delivery system for the park's tourism, recreation and interpretive products and services, as well as points for public access and control. Their customers are the park's customers. For example, a concessionaire can provide guide services, infrastructure and maintenance of a trail to improve the quality of the visitor experience, allowing ANAM to use its limited resources at other sites.

Another kind of partnership could involve tour operators that use the park. For example, the Gamboa Rainforest Resort might be willing to assist with the development of a short loop trail to interpret the Camino de Cruces Trail for their guests as well as the general public. Of course, it is equally important for ANAM to work closely with other agencies in such a project. In the near future, the park should explore potential linkages with new partners who could use the park as a destination, for example, cruise ship and railroad passengers.

Because most of the country's tourism and business infrastructure is concentrated in Panama City and Colon, very little economic benefit is distributed to smaller communities within the Panama Canal Watershed. This is an important issue worldwide because it is frequently rural residents who have some of the greatest impact on natural resources. Without their share of the growing tourism industry, they will continue to be forced to find other ways to make a living – such as farming and hunting – which can threaten the future of the park. Therefore, **serious effort must be made to include rural communities as stakeholders in future tourism activities**.

How can we involve these communities? Some ideas include:

- Connecting them to the park and each other with new tour routes and packages
- Involving them in a familiarization tour
- Use their images in promotional materials
- Show their location on park tourism maps
- Guide training for community members
- Promote their community-based tourism activities in the park

Another type of partnership with the private sector is donated money and labor for projects to improve and maintain the park's infrastructure. Priority projects could be identified in consultation with ANAM and advertised in **a catalog to attract potential sponsors**. Projects might include visitor parking, bathrooms, signage, and trails improvement.

5.7 Interagency Coordination

With multiple agencies with overlapping jurisdictions and numerous stakeholders, it is important to **carefully coordinate between all the players**. This will require an inter-institutional committee for ecotourism with the full participation of NGOs, tourism businesses, and communities.

Since this program is focused on Soberania National Park, it is appropriate that ANAM take lead responsibility, with technical and financial support from USAID. This does not mean that ANAM is responsible for doing all the work. ANAM's primary responsibility is for managing and protecting the resources that provide the setting for sustainable tourism. Without this high-quality environment, tourism is not possible. ANAM, through this action plan, can help set priorities, initiate activities, provide standards and guidelines, and oversee results. Other partners can take the lead in implementing specific action items.

5.8 Standards and Guidelines

There are few existing standards and guidelines used by ANAM for managing recreation and tourism activities within the park. These are especially important for the park to respond to requests by concessionaires to develop tourism facilities and programs at the Pipeline Road and Plantation Road trail. We recommend the development of a **sustainable tourism methodology** for these and other proposals based on international standards and approaches, such as Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) and the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS), and input from local stakeholders. As a part of this methodology, **existing standards should be researched** to identify those most suitable for use by the park.

6.0 ACTION PLAN

A total of 38 possible action items were identified during this study (Annex A). Of course there were many more excellent recommendations, but these were the most feasible action items, reinforced each other, and could be implemented quickly.

Through discussions with ANAM staff, 10 priority actions or categories were selected and five of these were recommended as priority action items for implementation in 2003. These are shown below.

Recommended Action Items

PROJECT	2003	2004	2005	Estimated Cost
Interpretation, communication & identity	X			\$46,000-\$50,000
Special promotional event	X			\$13,000-\$50,000
Promotional materials	X			\$10,000-\$35,000
Bird Trail Map	X			\$5,000-\$10,000
Training				
Interpretive guide training		X		\$17,000-\$20,000
LAC workshop		X		\$15,000-\$20,000
Ecotourism workshop			X	\$7,000-\$10,000
RARE guide training			X	\$120,000
USA study tour			X	\$50,000-\$60,000
Ecotourism committee	X	X	X	\$12,000-\$20,000
Tourism packages				
Water trails		X		\$8,000-\$10,000
Heritage Corridor		X		\$20,000-\$30,000
Biking trails			X	\$10,000-\$15,000
Scenic Highway			X	\$10,000-\$15,000
Railroad interpretation			X	\$15,000-\$20,000
Venta de Cruces and Camino de Cruces				
Survey and mapping		X		\$75,000-\$85,000
Planning and design			X	\$85,000-\$95,000
Manufacture/printing			X	\$90,000-\$100,000
Standards and Guidelines		X		\$8,000-\$10,000
Infrastructure improvements		X		\$3,000-\$8,000
Total Estimated Costs				\$618,000 - \$783,000

General descriptions and cost estimates for these action items are provided below.

Recommended Action Items for 2003-2006

- 1) **Interpretation, Communication and Identity.** Prepare an interpretive/strategic communication plan, with stakeholder input. Define goals, outcomes, target audiences, thematic messages, and conceptual media and program products for guided and self-guided tours. Also define appropriate niche markets and develop an image and logo for promoting the PNS as an ecotourism destination with a high-quality environment. This is a foundation for many other action items. Estimated cost: \$46,000-\$50,000.
- 2) **Special Promotional Event.** Celebrate Panama's Centennial with a familiarization tour for travel writers and photographers and produce articles and a press kit to highlight the PNS's world-class attractions and promote the park as an ecotourism destination. Estimated cost: \$13,000 for planning and a press kit, and up to \$50,000 depending on the number of writers and photographers invited.
- 3) **Promotional Materials.** Design an integrated "family" of brochures, banners, flyers, maps, posters, and postcards to advertise the PNS. Produce a small set of these items to generate support and immediate visibility for the park's ecotourism program. Estimated cost: \$10,000-\$35,000.
- 4) **Bird Trail Map.** Finalize, design and produce a Bird Trail map with Audubon for sale to the public. The profits will be used by Audubon to reprint the map and to assist the park with its environmental education programs. Estimated cost: \$5,000-\$10,000.
- 5) **Training.** Conduct training in interpretation, ecotourism and English language skills for guides and LAC, ecotourism, tourism management, and concessions for ANAM. Estimated costs:
 - Interpretive guide training - \$17,000-\$20,000
 - LAC workshop - \$15,000-\$20,000
 - Ecotourism workshop - \$7,000-\$10,000
 - RARE guide training including English - \$120,000.
 - USA study tour for ANAM staff - \$50,000 - \$60,000
- 6) **Ecotourism Committee.** Provide technical assistance and administrative support for the development of an inter-institutional committee with stakeholders from NGOs, tourism businesses, and communities. This committee can define roles and establish priorities, find private investment, establish standards and guidelines, and deal with visitor impacts through the Limits of Acceptable Change methodology. Estimated cost: \$12,000-\$20,000.

- 7) ***Tourism Packages.*** Develop new routes and information that promote sustainable tourism and connect communities via biking, boats, cars, and the railroad. Estimated costs:
- Water trails field assessment, report, and materials - \$8,000-\$10,000
 - Heritage corridor concept and materials - \$20,000-\$30,000
 - Bike trails fieldwork, design, and materials - \$10,000-\$15,000
 - Scenic Highway concept and materials for Madden and Gaillard highways- \$10,000-\$15,000
 - Railroad interpretive plan and materials - \$15,000-\$20,000
- 8) ***Venta de Cruces and Camino de Cruces.*** Develop a pilot project involving all stakeholders to enhance and interpret these world-class historic resources as a sustainable tourism attraction, produce economic benefits, and increase the quality of the visitor experience. Estimated costs:
- Survey and map the town site and trail - \$75,000-\$85,000
 - Interpretive planning, design of signs, poster, map brochure and portable exhibit including 3 panels each at Venta de Cruces and Gamboa Resort mirador - \$85,000-\$95,000
 - Manufacture and delivery of signs, sign mounts, map brochure, and poster - \$90,000-\$100,000.
- 9) ***Standards and Guidelines.*** Develop a sustainable tourism methodology for proposed concession trail developments at Pipeline Road and Plantation Road based on international standards and approaches and input from local stakeholders through the LAC methodology. Require the private sector proponents to develop and conduct planning and LAC monitoring, with oversight by ANAM, inter-institutional coordination through an ecotourism committee, and technical assistance through USAID. In addition, research existing international standards and guidelines and suggest those suitable for PNS. Estimated cost: \$8,000-\$10,000.
- 10) ***Infrastructure Improvements.*** Find potential sponsors for improving and maintaining visitor facilities by creating a list of specific needs and estimated costs of ANAM's highest priorities, for example toilets, trails, or interpretive kiosks. Prepare an illustrated catalog and distribute it to possible sponsors through the inter-institutional ecotourism committee.

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ANNEX A
POSIBLES ACCIONES PARA PLAN PILOTO DE ECOTURISMO
EN EL PARQUE NACIONAL SOBERANIA

TURISMO

- Rio Medio Chagres y Santa Rosa como una atracción turística
- Facilitar un inventario de sitios de interés turístico para programa TCI-IPAT
- Programa de vacaciones para voluntarios que trabajen en el parque (p.e. Earthwatch)
- La comunidad de Limón como puerta al Lago Gatún y la entrada norte a Soberanía
- Desarrollar una imagen turística y logo como destino ecoturístico para PNS
- Desarrollar productos y paquetes para turismo educativo
- Estudios de caso de ecoturismo sobre Canopy Tower

INFORMACION E INTERPRETACION

- Plan de interpretación para el Parque (guías y autoguías)
- Brochure o volante para aeropuerto y hoteles sobre PNS
- Información sobre el PNS, sencillo y barato (mapa) en la sede administrativa
- Interpretación de las investigaciones científicas de STRI y traducción de los resúmenes
- Facilitar el mapa de observación de aves de Audubon en el área del Canal
- Diseño y producción de pendones (banners de vinil para exteriores de bajo costo y fácil transporte) de interpretación del parque para educación y propaganda
- Información e interpretación sobre el Parque en internet
- Materiales impresos o postales con mensajes de conservación para entregar a turistas después de su recorrido
- Paquete informativo sobre el parque para periodistas y operadores de turismo
- Interpretación del Parque para pasajeros de cruceros y del ferrocarril
- Interpretación sobre PNS dentro de Gamboa Rainforest Resort, Summit, rampa publica, Camping Resort, Canopy Tower y el pueblo de Gamboa
- Interpretación para pasajeros de cruceros mientras viajan en el bus de Colon a Gamboa (video)
- Interpretación para Venta de Cruces y Camino de Cruces

CAPACITACION

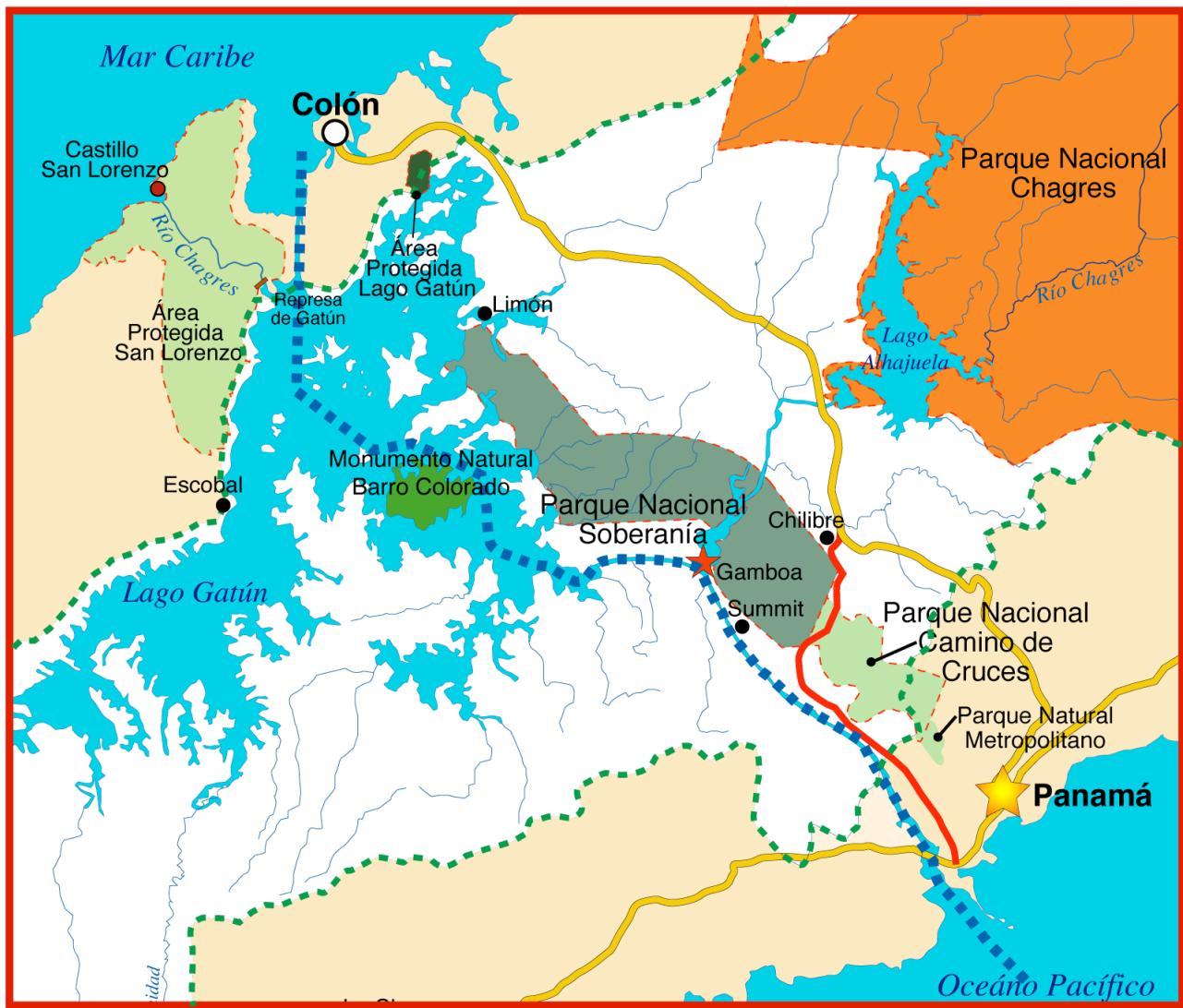
- Entrenamiento de guías en observación de aves
- Capacitación en ecoturismo
- Apoyar a las compañías de turismo en una mejor interpretación del Parque y la Cuenca del Canal
- Entrenamiento de guías sobre ecoturismo, interpretación e inglés
- Apoyar un programa escolar sobre el parque

SENDEROS

- Un sendero para principiantes diferente a El Charco
- Senderos que empiecen en Summit
- Sendero circular en Plantación para no regresar por el mismo camino
- Un sendero o rutas para bicicletas diferente a Pipeline
- Rutas o paquetes turísticos que conecten comunidades por diferentes medios (por agua, caminando, caballo)
- Desarrollar senderos acuáticos, mapas de rutas acuáticas y plataformas sobre el Lago para camping

POLITICAS

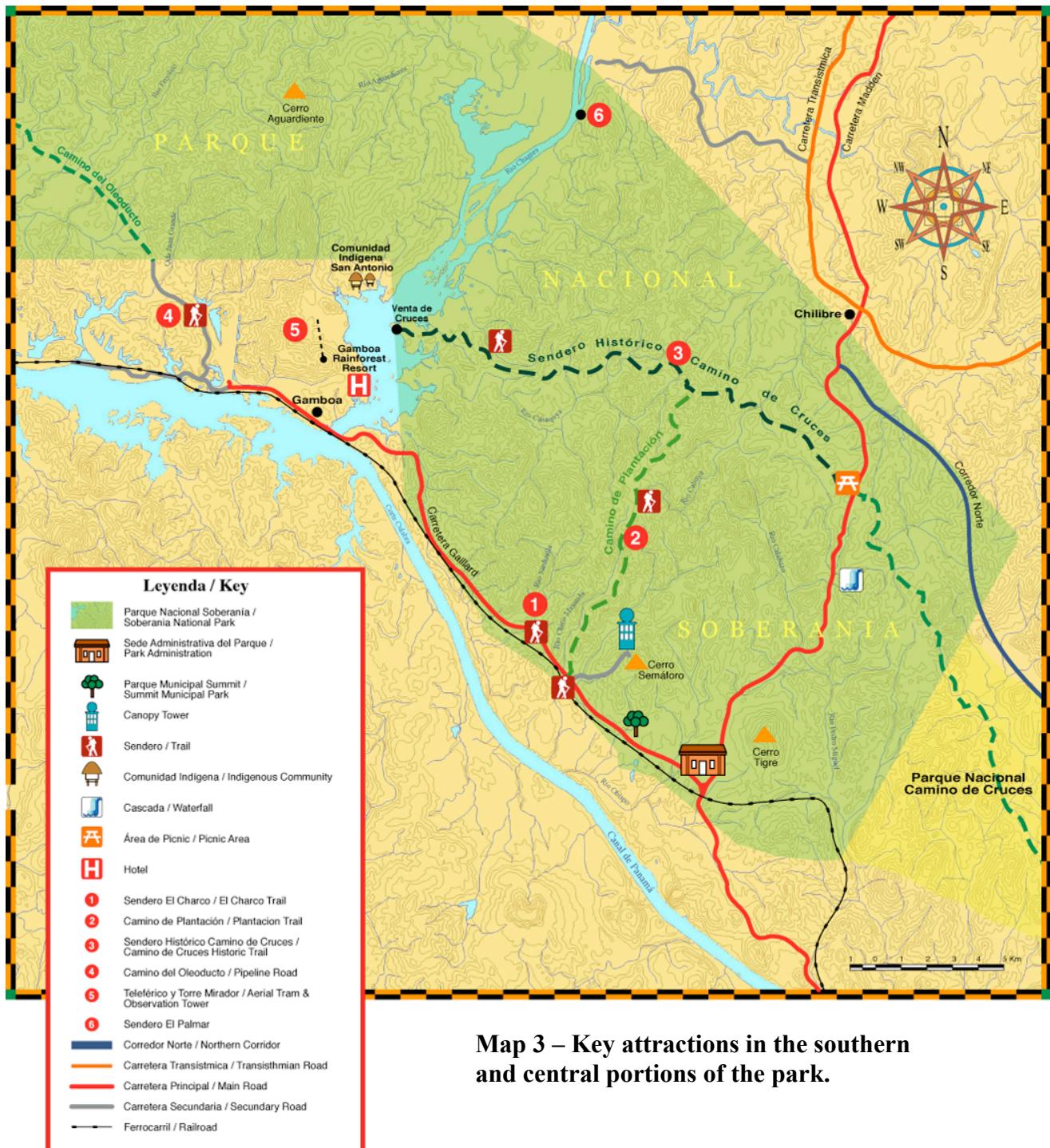
- Usar concesiones que provean el servicio de guías en los senderos
- Estándares y lineamientos para turismo sostenible en Soberanía
- Desarrollar alianzas estratégicas entre diferentes sectores (gob, ongs, comunidades, empresas privadas)
- Desarrollar alianzas entre los hoteles y el Parque para turismo, interpretación y conservación de los recursos
- Facilitar que funcionarios de ANAM e IPAT viajen a USA para ver y aprender sobre interpretación y ecoturismo
- Explorar oportunidades para trabajo conjunto entre ANAM e industria de cruceros
- Corredor histórico transístmico



Map 1 – Location of Soberanía National Park and its relationship to other protected areas.



Map 2 – Soberania National Park.



Map 3 – Key attractions in the southern and central portions of the park.

PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1 - Boundary signs for Soberania National Park were installed with USAID assistance as part of the MARENA Project.



Figure 2 - The Pipeline Road has an international reputation among serious bird-watchers. However, unrestricted use and lack of maintenance has created problems in some areas, especially during the wet season.



Figure 3 - Built during WWII to service the oil pipeline, the Pipeline Road needs immediate attention. A preliminary inspection estimated a cost of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 for bridge and road repair.



Figure 4 - The unoccupied guard station could be used to control access, collect fees, and provide visitor information for the Pipeline Road.

