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PASO DEL ISTMO TOURISM

SWOT RAPID ASSESMENT



TECHNICAL REPORT

PASO DE ISTMO TOURISM

SWOT RAPID ASSESMENT

Conservation and Sustainable Tourism in Critical Watersheds

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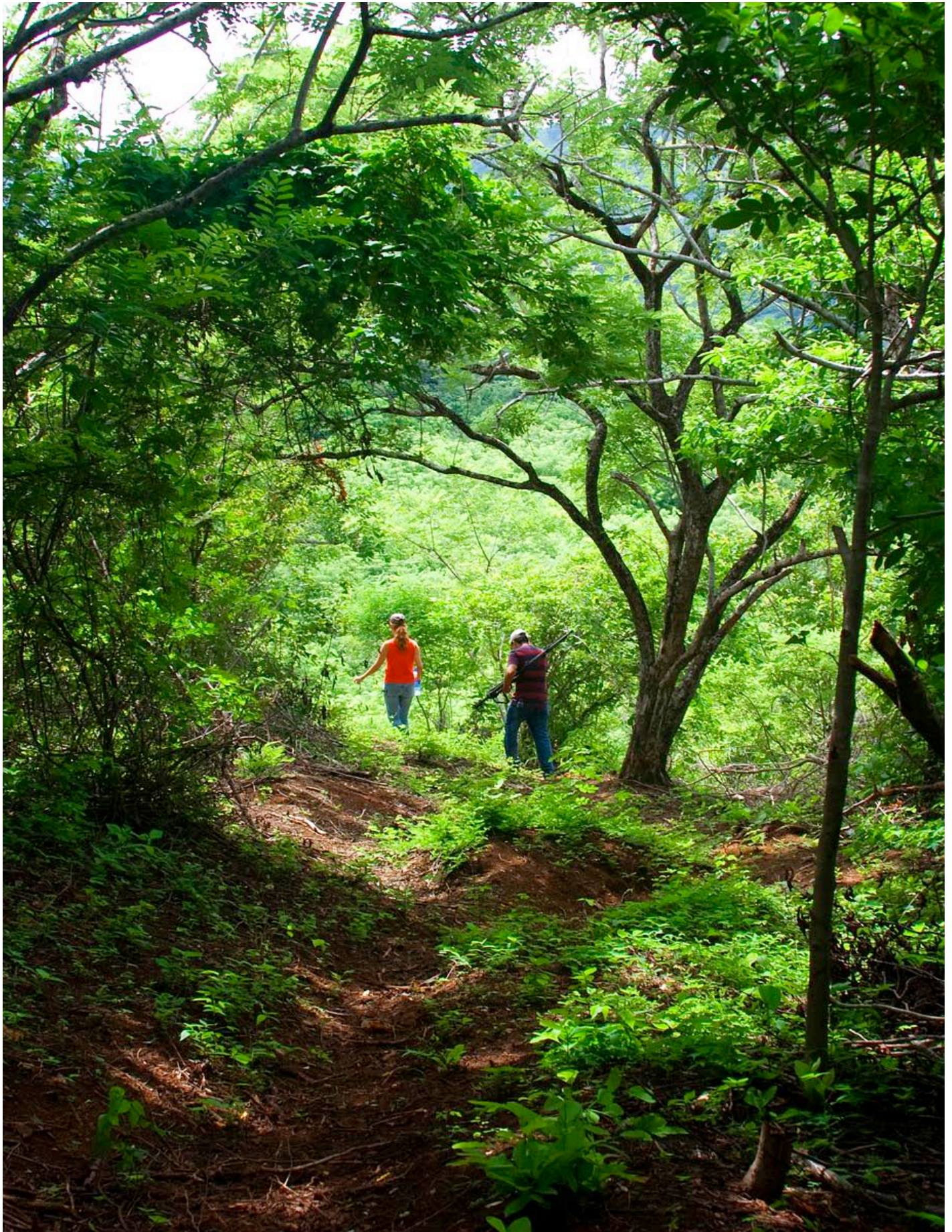
In collaboration with

Paso Pacífico

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Hikers at Fincas de Escamequita.

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Vplcano Concepción can beseen from one of the project sites.



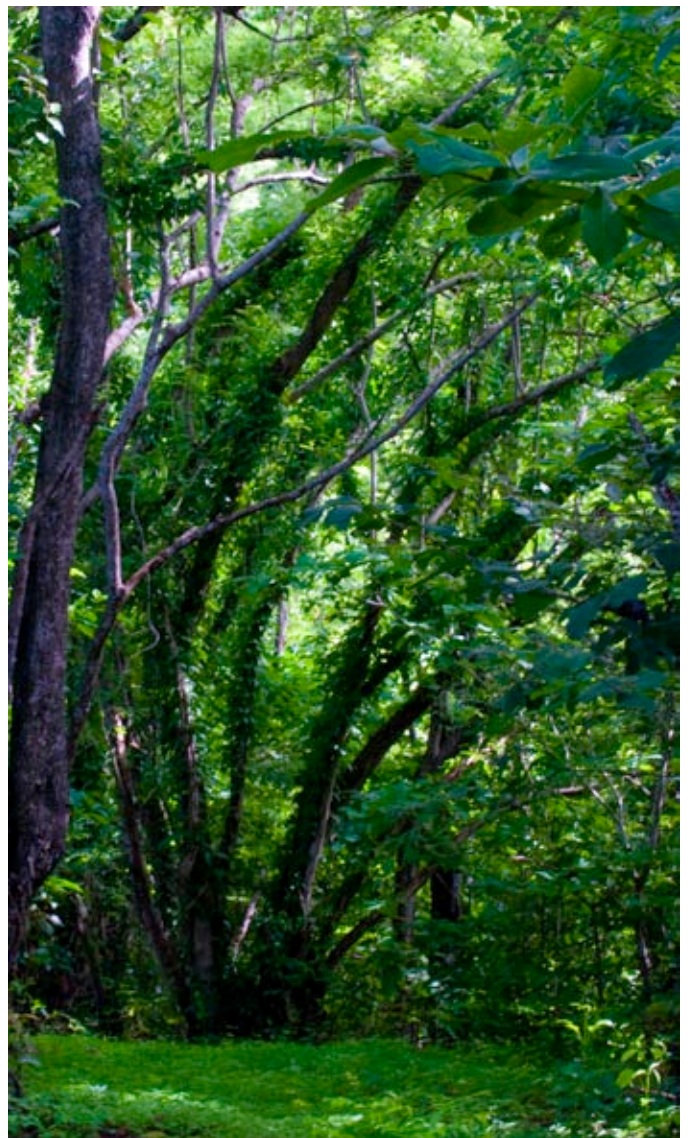
INTRODUCTION

A rapid assessment of tourism opportunities of the southwestern corner of Nicaragua was conducted October 25 to 29, 2007. Team members included Jerry Bauer, Liza González, Jerry Wylie, Nuria Dixon, Olga Ramos, and Heidi Salazar. The objective was to examine existing and proposed programs of the nonprofit organization Paso Pacifico and make recommendations for possible funding and technical assistance through USAID/Nicaragua.

This assessment focused on the biological corridor along the coast from Punta Majagual on the north to the fishing village of Ostional in the south, a distance of about 25 km. It also included six private fincas (farms), and protected areas stretching 12 km. along the southern edge of Lake Nicaragua from the community of Cárdenas to mouth of the Sapoa River. A third project area between these near the community of Acetuno could not be visited because of poor road conditions (see Figure 1).

PASO PACIFICO

Paso Pacifico is a non-profit organization whose mission is to restore and conserve the natural ecosystem along Central America's central Pacific coast, ensuring connectivity and function of wild habitat along with sustainable community development involving private landowners and the private sector. Their project area is located within the isthmus between Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean, a narrow passageway that has served as a land bridge for wildlife migrating between North and South America.



DESCRIPTION OF AREAS VISITED

San Juan del Sur Community and Vicinity

The town continues to experience growth from international visitors primarily interested in surfing, tourism, and real estate investment, as well as diving and sport fishing. It is also a popular destination for Nicaraguans during holidays. A cursory survey of hotels and businesses shows that information on local tourism attractions in and around the town is variable and generally poor. Although a new tourism map and index of businesses for the town is available, there is no central location where visitors can obtain information.

Da Flying Frog canopy tour located 5 minutes outside of town, offers horseback rides and a 2.5 km zip line between 17 tree platforms. Participants can ride a horse or a military 4x4 truck to the top and enjoy a 30-minute ride downhill.

Water taxis, public buses, and various trucks and 4x4s provide access to beaches and communities along the coast.

Las Fincas de Escamequita

Located approximately 12 km south of San Juan del Sur near the community of Escamequita, this project involves a partnership with an eco-friendly private land development that promotes conservation, reforestation, and ecotourism.

In addition to a tree nursery and an extensive program of reforestation, future plans include nature trails for hiking and horseback rides, bird-watching, a bunkhouse for groups and volunteers, and a Bed and Breakfast facility.

We visited an area currently being reforested and developed for hiking and horse rides. It had scattered trees and a small stream at the bottom and a rich forest toward the top of the ridge full of birds and butterflies. Currently the unnamed, 4 km trail is used primarily for maintaining newly-planted trees. Later it can be redesigned for easier climbing and to include rest areas and vistas along the way.

La Flor

Traveling from Escamequita to La Flor required crossing two large rivers, passable only by 4x4 vehicles due the high water and muddy sections from recent heavy rains. In La Flor, we were unable to cross the river but did visit the historic hacienda currently being restored by La Cooperativa Jose Adan Calderon, which also has plans to do reforestation in the area. Perched on a rocky outcrop next to the road and surrounded by giant trees, this attractive building will provide visitor information and possibly lodging.

Next we visited the world-famous turtle beach at the La Flor Wildlife Refuge, site of massive “arribadas” or arrivals of up to 40,000 animals in a single night. The MARENA office here houses park guards and also serves as a basic visitor center. Again, because of the recent rains, we were unable to drive to the parking area and had to hike to the beach through deep



- ◀ An ocean view from Las Fincas de Escamequita.
- ▶ The forest at Las Fincas de Escamequita.
- ▲ The San Juan del Sur bay from one of the project sites.
- ▼ La Flor beach.





- ▲ Isla Vista near Cárdenas.
- ▼ Mahagual beach..
- ▼ Bahía Anima beach.



mud. On the beach we observed military personnel stationed here to deter theft of turtle eggs.

The MARENA official in charge was unable to tell us how many visitors they receive annually, but did say that up to 20 local community members are hired during large arribadas to help monitor and protect nests.

The Cárdenas Area

There are six private fincas or protected areas in the vicinity of Cárdenas involved with tourism and reforestation projects with Paso Pacifico. Located about 8 km by road west of Cárdenas, the Finca Isla Vista has a modern two-bedroom guest house near the shore of Lake Nicaragua, as well as more than 100 hectares of mature secondary forest on the slope above. (The owner is also the owner/general manager of the Pelican Eyes Piedras y Olas Hotel & Resort and development in San Juan del Sur and has a strong interest in environmentally and socially responsible development.) Previously grazed areas of this property have recently been planted with thousands of trees by the Paso Pacific program.

After driving part way up a primitive road, we hiked 45 minutes to a remote section of the stream that empties into the lake near the guest house. During high water, this stream is visited by several types of spawning fish that swim up from the lake. We heard howler monkeys and saw spider and white-faced monkeys during our hike. The lake side portion of the property, halfway between Punta de Piedra and Punta Cangrejo, has spectacular views of the twin volcanoes on Ometepe Island, clearly visible 20 km miles to the north.

Situated close to the road about 3 km to the west, Finca Las Guacamayas, has a rustic cabin available for rent. Situated between the road and the lake, it has a large common room, bathroom, kitchen and porch, but very few furnishings at present. Meals are available from the property caretaker and his family who live next door.

The mouth of the Sapoa River looked promising on the map but turned out to be very swampy and inaccessible. There was a locked gate on the abandoned road on the west side and no views of the lake where this road ends at the river mouth. However, there is an old INTUR facility near the bridge on the west bank that appears to have potential for boat tours along the lower 4 km of this attractive river. However, we were unable to visit it due to limited time.

The road from Sapoa to Cárdenas is interlocking concrete blocks and is in very good condition. Driving time for the 18 km from the Sapoa River to La Virgen was 20 minutes. From there to San Juan del Sur took another 40 minutes at dusk, over a badly-maintained paved road. Total driving time from San Juan del Sur to Cárdenas was less than 1 1/2 hours.

Review of coastal areas from Majagual to Ostional

The team hired a power boat to review the beaches and coastline and visit the community of Ostional. We first went north from San Juan del Sur past Bahía Nacascolo, which was very



protected, and into Bahía El Toro, where we encountered three kayakers who had paddled over from Marsella, an American living in Nicaragua who had fishing equipment and two Nicaraguan friends (one suffering from sea-sickness). They had encountered rougher water around the rocky headlands where incoming swells were reflected back and created confused seas.

Marsella Beach had experienced significant erosion from surf and flooding during recent storms. The single waterside bar/restaurant was closed and the beach was littered with wood debris and trash. Nearby Marsella Beach Resort was also officially closed.

Los Playones Beach was full of waves and happy surfers. The beach has a small beach side bar/hostel popular with surfers, although the sign indicated this was “Maderas,” the next beach north. Due to road conditions, it was not possible to drive any further north from here to Morgan’s Rock resort at Playa Majagual two days earlier.

Motoring around the dramatic rock spire of Punto Majagual—which may have potential for rock-climbing—we landed at the expansive and pristine Majagual Beach, home to the famous Morgan’s Rock ecolodge. Unlike many of the previous beaches which were clogged with tons of wood debris and trash, this beach was totally clean, with only a little erosion near the resort’s cabanas. Without stops, this 10 km trip took about 30 minutes from San Juan del Sur. Other than surfing and Morgan’s Rock resort there appears to be very few tourism attractions or opportunities in this area (we later learned there was camping near Bahía El Toro.)

Remanso is 6 km south of San Juan del Sur and one of the few places along the coast accessible by road, and where food and lodging are available. The dramatic rocky shoreline is a smaller version of the Big Sur of California.

Immediately south, Tamarindo and Hermosa beaches, favorite surfing destinations, are only accessible by boat. Hermosa is the longest beach along this section of coast.

Las Tablas is very similar to Hermosa but without the surfers. Escamequitas Beach is backed by the river valley that leads to Las Fincas project visited earlier.

Immediately to the southeast is the surfing beach Yankee. It is accessible by road through the Yankee Cantamar real estate development which has created building lots by clearing the land of trees and bulldozing level lots.

Escameca Beach is situated at the mouth of the Escameca River, the largest of the three travelers must cross between San Juan del Sur and Ostional. It is said to be home to large crocodiles.

Coco Beach has the best visitor services and direct beach access, including overnight accommodations, a small store, and restaurant, along with a few private homes. Unfortunately, it also has a new condominium development that has excavated a large section of the hillside above the beach, creating an ugly scar and the potential for serious erosion if not stabilized soon.

La Redonda and Brasilito are tiny beaches situated between Coco and La Flor beaches. Because of easy road access to these areas, turtle nests here are vulnerable to theft.

La Flor was visited earlier by land and is described above. We observed many turtles relaxing on the surface about one mile offshore, where they were preparing for the next arribada. This many turtles so close to shore presents opportunities for nature tours.

The 4 km of rocky coastline from Punta La Flor to Punta El Roble was the most dramatic and beautiful we saw. Waves crash against colorful cliffs and rocky islands, creating spectacu-



Cliffs with blow-holes near El Ostional.

lar blowholes gushing water more than 10 meters. It was also the most pristine, with no evidence of roads, tree cutting, or human occupation. In the center of this shoreline is the beautiful 3-lobed Bahía Anima (another map showed it as Bahía Guacalito), said to have the best snorkeling on the south coast.

Ostional Beach was completely covered with wood debris and trash from the recent storm. A few homes and a tropical fish business were located along the beach, along with fishing boats from the nearby community of Ostional. Community Tours headquartered in San Juan del Sur offers three different tours here: The Fishermen's Tours, Nature and History Tour by horse, and Tour of the Virgin Bays immediately to the north and south.

Currently there are three active guides and plans to have them certified by INTUR in 2008. There are two rooms for rent on the beach and another hospedaje in town, less than one km away. Foreign visitors are primarily European, with very few from the U.S.A., and some have even arrived by bicycle.

Ostional is a logical "base camp" for adventure travelers who want to explore this section of the coast. It is near the limit for easy day trips from San Juan del Sur, so the availability of food and lodging here is important for visitors who wish to stay overnight.

SWOT RAPID ASSESSMENT

An assessment of the area's potential for tourism are summarized in Table I and in Appendix I. Based on attractions, conditions, and community values, its suitability for tourism is generally good. Readiness for tourism, based on a variety of factors including access, tourism information, image, and customers, is also good.

The region's healthy forests, rich wildlife, beautiful bays and sunny beaches have made it a very popular tourist destination for locals and foreign visitors. It also has programs that support and enhance the environment and the visitor experience, including public and private protected areas, extensive reforestation projects, and community-based rural tourism. San Juan del Sur provides all the basic needs for travelers and serves as the major portal and center of touristic activities. From there visitors can go by road or boat to all the area's attractions within 1 hour.

However, there are some problems. Roads can become impassible after heavy rains, there is a general lack of visitor information and signage, and the quality of visitor facilities and services in rural areas is poor. There are also very few professionally trained guides.

There are many opportunities to enhance the area's tourism. A new road connecting to Costa Rica to San Juan del Sur would improve transportation and open up new markets. The Pelican Eyes resort in San Juan del Sur could provide important support for rural tourism in Cárdenas area, where the owner has property. Paso Pacifico's rural tourism projects and private protected areas will be opening doors for visitors to interact with local residents and businesses. Specific opportunities for camping, kayaking, reforestation, volunteerism, and environmental interpretation are identified as potential projects.

The most significant threats to tourism are political instability, climate change and more powerful storms, over-use and over-development, pollution and trash, illegal turtle egg theft, and loss of scenic quality from poorly designed developments.



Reforesting al one of the project sites near Cárdenas.

Table I**SWOT RAPID ASSESSMENT****STRENGTHS**

Healthy Forests

Wildlife, especially turtles

Attractive Scenery

Good local infrastructure

Good local support for tourism

Local knowledge

Numerous potential projects

San Juan del Sur as portal city

Transportation by road & water

Reforestation projects

Community Tourism program

Strong tourism growth

Public & private protected areas

Strong interest in environmental
& socially responsible tourism

Broad range of tourism niches

OPPORTUNITIES

New road to Costa Rica

Tourism linkages with CR

Camping

Sea kayak tours & fishing

Pelican Eyes connection

Carbon offset travel

Travelers' philanthropy &
volunteerism

Carbon offset tour projects

Travel technology

Environmental interpretation

More rural tourism projects

New private protected areas

Sailboat tours on L. Nicaragua

Real estate development

WEAKNESSES

Poor roads

Poor signage

Poorly designed trails

Lack of public toilets

Insects (seasonal by the lake)

Travel time and cost

Quality of some facilities

Few trained guides

Limited beach access

Lack of awareness of rural tourism

opportunities



One of the beautiful bays near the project sites.

THREATS

Political instability

Climate change and storms

Over-development

Pollution and Trash

Over-use (seasonal)

Illegal turtle egg market

Scenic quality degradation

Drug trafficking along the coast



RECOMMENDATIONS

VISITOR INFORMATION

It is important to provide necessary information to visitors at all stages of the travel experience, from pre-trip planning and decision-making, during travel, entry to specific attractions and areas, participation in various activities (guided or unguided), exit, and post-travel. This is accomplished through the internet, published guides, maps, brochures, signage, advertising, and through personal contacts.

- Identify and fill gaps in critical visitor information.
- Upload travel information, maps and photos to popular networks on the internet (TripAdvisor, Google, WikiTravel, etc.).
- Produce specific printed materials as needed.
- Develop roadside signs to identify local facilities and attractions, especially food, lodging and guide services.
- Assist Paso Pacifico in expanding its website to include more information for travelers interested in reforestation, wildlife conservation, and rural tourism.

CATAMARAN SAILING TOURS ON LAKE NICARAGUA

The mysterious double-volcano island of Omotepe, visible to all who travel along the Panamerican Highway, calls visitors to come explore. Only 15 km north of Cárdenas, the island could be reached in 30-45 minutes by boat. Day trips in catamaran sailboats are popular in other tropical areas and could be successful here as well.

- Explore the feasibility of providing boat tours from the Cárdenas coast.
- Determine suitable launch sites (Sapoa River, Finca Isla Vista, Cárdenas).
- Determine attractions and interpretive potential on Omotepe Island.

INTERPRETIVE PLANNING

Heritage interpretation is more than providing information. It connects visitors to special places and reveals meaning in ways that are entertaining, personally relevant, organized around a central message, and have a specific purpose. Goals may be emotional, intellectual (learning) or changing behavior. We recommend development of specific interpretive plans for:

- Paso Pacifico focusing on reforestation and the importance of a biological corridor.
- Community Tours offered at Ostional.
- Sea Turtles.

SEA KAYAK TOURS

The southern coast appears to be an excellent location for sea kayaking. Conditions are best from mid-December to May and August according to Fidel Lopez, owner of a dive shop in San Juan del Sur. Paddlers may encounter more rain from May through July, although this can be refreshing. Strong south winds with rough seas are frequent from September through the first half of December –however, this part of the coast may be somewhat protected by mountains in Costa Rica on the other side of the Bahía de Salinas.

- Conduct a detailed assessment of kayaking opportunities in and around the community of Ostional.
- Provide a 2-day intensive training for guides.
- Develop kayak tour marketing materials.
- Donate 3 kayaks and the necessary equipment to jump-start kayak tours as part of the Community Tour program.
- Explore the possibility of using kayaks for sport fishing and turtle-watching.

- ◀ Technical adviser Jerry Bauer kayaking near the coast.
- ▶ One of the project sites beeing reforested.



CARBON-NEUTRAL TRAVEL

Many internet-based programs allow travelers to calculate and mitigate the carbon produced during their trip. They may then purchase “offsets” by investing tree-planting, recycling, or renewable energy projects.

- Provide opportunities for visitors to contribute to local projects, either through existing internet programs before they travel or after they arrive.
- Develop ways for visitors to directly participate in local projects either through a guided tour or by volunteering.
- Develop interpretive information to highlight the connections between travel and the environment and explain how local projects can make a difference.

TRAVELERS' PHILANTHROPY

Another way for socially and environmentally-conscious traveler and tour operators to respond to local problems is for them to invest money, expertise, and time to help the places they visit.

- Identify possible projects and advertise them on-the-ground and on the internet.
- Encourage local business to become partners and actively support these projects.
- Develop interpretive messages and stories to connect visitors to these places emotionally and encourage them to donate their time and money.

CAMPING

Some portion of the travel market will be interested in camping. However, there are very few opportunities currently available.

- Identify potential camping such as the forest behind La Flor Beach.
- Provide basic bathroom facilities and drinking water.
- Charge a daily fee to cover maintenance of the facilities.

GUIDE AND HOST TRAINING

The following professional training is recommended:

- Sustainable tourism for communities.
- Specialized training for tour guides (including birding and turtles).
- Kayak guide training (see #3 above).
- Host training for employees who are not guides but have direct contact with visitors.

FAM TOUR

Organize and conduct a familiarization tour of local attractions for travel writers and tour operators at the local, national, and international level.

TRAIL PLANNING

Design and build hiking trails that meet international standards and provide opportunities for interpretation at Las Fincas de Escamequita.

MOUNTAIN BIKING EVENT

Explore the potential for developing an annual mountain bike rally (not necessarily a race), that connects and explores rural areas from El Acetuno to San Juan del Sur for the purpose of raising awareness of the area's tourism potential and bringing economic benefits to local communities.





Appendix I

CHECKLIST FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Give each factor a score of 0 to 5 points (5 being best)

SUITABILITY FACTORS...Can you have tourism?		Score
A	Attractions - Is there sufficient “pay-off” for visitors’ investment of time, effort and money? Attractive scenery? Unique and authentic nature & culture?	3 or 4
B	Natural & Regulatory Environment – There are no serious limitations to tourism due to environmental conditions or government regulations.	2
C	Community values - Is tourism a good fit for your community? Consistent with the cultural values and community goals and priorities? Supported by traditional, religious and political leaders?	4
	Sub Total	9 - 10
	Suitability Score - Multiply sub total by 3. A minimum acceptable score is 24 points	27 -30
READINESS FACTORS...Are you ready for tourism?		
D	Planning & Governance – Is there good planning, organization, and leadership?	4
E	Access & Infrastructures – Is there good access and tourism infrastructure?	3 or 4
F	Customers & Commerce – Do you have customers and business opportunities?	4
G	Local Capacity – Is there professional expertise?	4
H	Information – Is there good visitor information and interpretation?	2
I	Marketing & Image – Do prospective customers know you?	2
	Readiness Score - A minimum acceptable score is 17 points.	19-20
	Total Suitability + Readiness – Less than 44 points is “marginal”, 45-60 points is “good to very good”, & 61 points or greater is “excellent.”	46-50



Las Fincas de Escamequita, as seen from the The bunkhouse at Las Fincas de Escamequita hiking trail.



The bunkhouse at Las Fincas de Escamequita could provide basic overnight facilities for educational groups.



Roads become impassable after heavy rains.



The nursery at Las Fincas de Escamequita provides seedlings for the reforestation program.



Hiking trail at Las Fincas de Escamequita.



One of the tour buses in San Juan del Sur.



Los Playones beach is a popular surfing area.



Marsella bay, just north of San Juan del Sur.



Majagual beach, home to Morgan's Rock ecoresort.



Kayakers in Bahia El Toro.



Punta Majagual.



Previously grazed area being reforested at Finca Isla Vista, near Cárdenas.



Two-bedroom guest house at Finca Isla Vista.



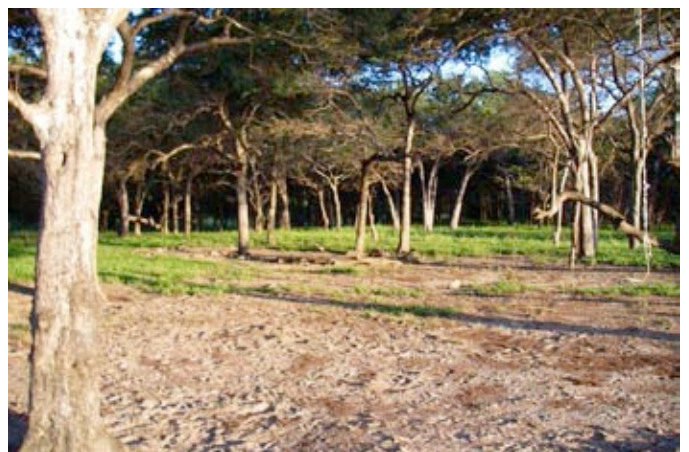
Guest house at Finca Las Guacamayas.



Historic hacienda being restored in La Flor.



Mouth of the Sapoá River.



Potential camping area at La Flor beach.



The attractive coastline near Ostional has potential for sea kayak tourism.



Cantamar Yankee real estate development.



Guest house on the beach at Ostional.



Majagual beach, home to Morgan's Rock ecoresort.



San Juan del Sur is the center of touristic activities along the southern Pacific coast of Nicaragua.