

Restoring the River

*The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources
as assets which it must turn over to the next generation **increased**...–
Teddy Roosevelt*

“Nobody even realizes it’s here.” This comment was made to me by a friend from Tamarindo during a perfect sunset at the beach in Junquillal, a small town near the mouth of the Rio Andamojo. OK, so it is hard to pronounce and almost as hard to find. The funny thing is, on your way from Santa Cruz to Tamarindo you drive right past a different valley—and we’re doing our best to make it even more so.

The Rio Andamojo watershed, like many in Costa Rica’s Guanacaste region, has experienced significant decline in soil resources, surface and ground water resources, forest and other vegetation systems. This 25,000 acre watershed originates about 15 kilometers from the coast, right near 27 de Abril and terminates at the mouth of the river in a greatly reduced mangrove swamp and river estuary. There are seven villages in the watershed and the underlying aquifer is one of the healthiest in this region of Costa Rica. The area is seriously impacted by deforestation and livestock grazing, leading to wide ranging and long-term harm to the upland, river and estuarine ecological systems. Having seen the problems in other coastal areas of Guanacaste there is a growing realization that comprehensive water resource management is the highest priority environmental need.

The elders in the valley recall sparkling clean year-round flows, more fish and crawdads than a family could eat, waterfowl, abundant game in the hills and plentiful crops. Our goal, restore the river to year round flow and develop the techniques, awareness and related economic activities to drive the process, increase conservation related employment and spread the benefits around.

The first step is a detailed hydrological study of the watershed, rainfall, runoff and ground water levels. Monitoring is being directed by Steve Apfelbaum of Applied Ecological Services, one of the foremost ecological restoration experts in the US. Concurrently presentations are being made in communities and schools and a watershed wide newspaper published monthly in Spanish and English. Local expertise in community organizing has been provided by the UNA in Nicoya.

In January of 2006, the University of Vermont and El Centro Verde will co-sponsor a course—for the third year in a row—on technical, social and business aspects of the watershed restoration project. The goal is to provide win-win opportunities for investors, the local communities and the environment. One local development—Tierra Pacifica—has already put a number of water conservation practices to work and is setting aside some land for small agricultural parcels.

Environmentally sound business opportunities include:

- Native species aquaculture
- Forest strips on hills to provide dry season forage for cattle and sustainably harvested forest products
- Drought resistant native species nursery
- Eventually, fly fishing for *guapote*, a freshwater fish that has all but disappeared from our river

The vision of restoring year round flow to the river in fifteen years may seem like sheer fantasy. Nonetheless, if we get the pieces of the social, economic and technical puzzle to fit together in a way that motivates the different sets of stakeholders, the river will take care of itself—with a little help from its newfound friends.

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