

Small Community Welcomes Foreign Volunteers

By Amanda Zibners Naprawa

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How often do modern travelers turn off their cell phones, forget their e-mail and dive headfirst into the local culture and language of a new place? On how many vacations do you get to milk a cow, make cheese and tortillas, learn how sugarcane is processed and then eat the sugar, practice Spanish and go horseback riding, all in the span of less than 24 hours? You can do all this and more in the small town of El Sur de Turrubares.

Nestled in rolling green hills on the southern edge of Carara National Park, inland from the central Pacific coast, sits the tiny town of El Sur. With a population of approximately 60 people and accessible only by a long, winding dirt road, it is not your typical tourist spot. Nonetheless, since 2003, visitors have been coming to this town as part of a volunteer vacation program with Globe Aware, a nonprofit organization focusing on cultural awareness and sustainability.

The rain forest north of El Sur was designated Carara National Park in 1998. This area is an important ecosystem because of its transitional location between rain forest and tropical dry forest. As a result, it is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna and is one of the few remaining habitats of the magnificent scarlet macaw. The park is also home to wildlife such as the American crocodile, great anteater, ocelot, the spider monkey, white-faced monkey and toucan.

While the importance of such a national park is clear, the creation of the protected area wreaked havoc on the small community of El Sur.

"When the reserve was created, lots of jobs were lost because agricultural and cattle ranching were affected, as was logging, forcing lots of people to move to the city for work," said Globe Aware volunteer



Revitalized Community: Above, Globe Aware volunteers Lisa Leonard and Bethany Battershell spend time reading with 6-year-old Raquel Salazar in the small community of El Sur de Turrubares. Below left, recycling centers such as this one help keep the town clean. Photos by Amanda Zibners Naprawa | Tico Times

coordinator Federico Chialdo.

As whole families began leaving for the city, this predominantly agricultural community began to disintegrate. In response to the loss of jobs and community, several El Sur residents began a grassroots effort under the name of EcoSur to develop new jobs in the community. Given the close proximity of the national park, one proposal was to encourage ecotourism into the El Sur area.

Ronald Sánchez, an EcoSur member and lifelong town resident, said the group felt that in order to attract tourists to the area, it would be important that the town be clean and well maintained. Thus began an intensive recycling program that has resulted in much less trash being deposited in the dump, and in the street and yards. El Sur is nearly spotless. In fact, the only place where a visitor will see piles of cans and bottles is in the large recycling center the town has been building with the help of volunteers. The center is located just up the hill from the main – and only – street in El Sur.

How did such a small town set high in the hills start bringing in volunteers from the United States and other countries? In 2003,

EcoSur joined forces with the nonprofit organization Globe Aware. According to executive director Kimberly Haley-Coleman, Globe Aware was searching for a community and organization that "had a thoroughly thought out and expressed wish list of projects, was safe, culturally interesting, and wanted interaction with volunteers." After looking at several communities, El Sur was found to have the "best overall fit for Globe Aware's volunteers and programs."

The EcoSur-Globe Aware alliance certainly seems to have had a positive impact on this community. Since Globe Aware began sending volunteers to El Sur in 2003, more than 500 have come to the town. According to EcoSur member Gilda Sánchez, the volunteers "help with the work that is necessary for the village." This work has included a variety of projects, including repairing pedestrian bridges, teaching computer and English classes, laying a new drinking-water system, building accommodations (including *cabinas* for visitors), planting trees and adding amenities to the school.

"All of these are steps toward sustainability," Haley-Coleman said.

The impact of the volunteers, however, is not limited to manual labor but also comes from the cultural and language exchange that occurs. In fact, a promising idea for further sustainability and job development in El Sur is to develop a language exchange and cultural immersion program in El Sur.

Cultural immersion is one of the highlights of a volunteer vacation in El Sur. As part of the Globe Aware program, volunteers are divided into small groups and eat their lunch and dinners in the homes of community members. These intimate gatherings offer visitors the unique opportunity to learn firsthand about the pace of life in El Sur and to hone their Spanish language skills, as well as help townspeople with their English.

Most of the volunteers who spoke to The Tico Times agreed that the real value of a trip to El Sur is this rare opportunity to get to know and befriend the people of the region.

When asked about her favorite part of the trip to El Sur, volunteer Lisa Leonard, 35, a speech and language pathologist from Cleveland, Ohio, said, "The best part of the trip was the intercultural exchange that occurred. The community graciously allowed people from another country into their homes and embraced the experience."

Bethany Battershell, 26, a recreational therapist from Lakewood, Ohio, echoed that sentiment: "It was the experience of eating in the families' homes and getting to know them and their culture. Even though I don't speak any Spanish, it was really interesting how we could communicate despite the language barrier."

The improvements in El Sur have been numerous and the community seems eager to continue on the path toward environmentally friendly living and sustainable development. Walking around the quiet, clean community, hearing various bird-songs and smelling the scent of flowers and fruit in the air, one does not wonder that El Sur's members want to continue down the path they are on. As Chialdo said, "Who wouldn't want to live here rather than in the city?"

Certainly, in the city, you won't catch a glimpse of the long-tailed macaw flying overhead during your afternoon siesta. ■

Amanda Zibners Naprawa, 31, is an attorney from Columbus, Ohio, who recently spent a week volunteering in El Sur with Globe Aware. For information on Globe Aware, e-mail info@globeaware.org or visit the organization's Web site at www.globeaware.org.



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