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**USAID CONSERVATION
OF CENTRAL AMERICAN
WATERSHEDS PROGRAM**

**DELIVERABLE NO 11: GULF OF HONDURAS FINAL REPORT
SUBCONTRACT #EP-I-04-03-00014-00-05**

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Submitted By: Solimar International

Contact: Natalie Sellier, Program Manager

1327 14th Street NW, Suite 320

Washington, DC 20005

Tel: (202) 518-6192 (x104)

Fax: (202) 518-6194

Email: n.sellier@solimarinternational.com

Submitted To: Chemonics International

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBTO	Community Based Tourism Organization
CCAW	Conservation of Central American Watersheds Program
DMO	Destination Management Organization
FUNDAECO	Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación
ICF	Izabal Conservation Fund
IGA	Izabal Geotourism Alliance
INGUAT	Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (Guatemalan Tourism Institute)
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
STI	Sustainable Travel International
TIC	Tourist Information Center
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Regional Context

Some of the most biologically diverse and beautiful areas in Central America are found within the Gulf of Honduras watershed. Because of the region's natural beauty, the burgeoning tourism sector has been driving small enterprise growth and real estate development. This economic progress has come at a price, however. One of the principal environmental threats currently facing the Gulf of Honduras watershed is unplanned mass tourism development and intense cruise ship traffic. The number of cruise ships visiting the Gulf of Honduras region has increased nearly fivefold since 2000, making the area the fastest-growing destination in the Caribbean. As the tourism industry grows, so does its potential to threaten the sustainability of the resources on which the industry depends.

Program Context

The Gulf of Honduras watershed is a transboundary site of critical biodiversity importance, where USAID has identified three primary intervention components to serve as the basis for the USAID-Conservation of Central American Watersheds (CCAW) program. These components are:

- A. Sustainable financing for areas of critical biodiversity importance;
- B. More consistent implementation of existing management plans for areas of critical biodiversity importance; and
- C. Private sector management and participation to enhance biodiversity conservation, natural resource protection, and sustainable economic growth.

In March of 2009, Solimar International began providing technical assistance on behalf of the USAID-CCAW program to design and implement a sustainable tourism development program in the destinations of Roatán, Honduras and Izabal, Guatemala. The main objective of the original proposal was to replicate a similar model to what was being implemented in Bocas del Toro, Panama (also under the USAID-CCAW program) focused on establishing a sustainable tourism cluster in both regions to facilitate public-private partnerships, increase the competitiveness of sustainable tourism operations, generate increased revenue for tourism linked to conservation, and improve the environmental performance of the private sector tourism operations in that area.

Roatán, Honduras

In June of 2009, the country of Honduras fell into limbo due to the forceful removal and exile of President Manuel Zelaya. Upon writing this final report, the United States, the Organization of American States, the United Nations, nor any other country has accepted the de facto authorities in Honduras as the legitimate government of the country. This ongoing political situation resulted in an interruption to the work of the USAID-CCAW program. Shortly after the coup, Solimar was asked to stop all sustainable tourism development activities initiated for Roatán, Honduras. Based on the successful sustainable tourism initiatives begun by Solimar during a brief three-month period on the ground, a number of opportunities exist to renew technical assistance in Roatán and

continue efforts at a time when it is needed most. A summary of the accomplishments achieved and suggestions for renewed technical assistance was completed as Deliverable #7 for the USAID-CCAW program.

After programmatic activities ceased in Roatán (July 2009), Solimar focused all efforts on the Izabal region of Guatemala to establish sustainable tourism clusters in the three main tourist destinations of the region—Puerto Barrios, Livingston, and Rio Dulce. The remainder of this final report focuses on the methodology applied in Izabal and the results achieved.

Izabal, Guatemala

Today, Santo Tomás de Castilla is one of the busiest ports in Central America and is currently expanding. In 2004, Santo Tomás de Castilla began receiving cruise ships causing a tremendous boost to the neglected region's tourism industry. An average of nine cruise ships currently arrive to the port each month, carrying up to 1,500 passengers each. Cruise ships visit Guatemala from October to May, which is the high season. Passengers typically seek to explore Guatemala's Mayan culture, which is spread throughout the country, and they are also drawn to the unique Garifuna culture in Livingston. Attractions within Izabal include Rio Dulce, Lake Izabal, the towns of Puerto Barrios and Livingston, the San Felipe Castle, and the Mayan ruins of Quirigua (a UNESCO world heritage site). Several community-based organizations also offer tours in the region, drawing a number of backpackers and overnight visitors.

With more than 50 cruise ships and around 1.7 million visitors each year, there is a range of concerns about the environmental impacts of cruise tourism, its benefits compared with stay-over tourism, and expansion plans that include accommodating more ships. The need for greatly increased destination management capacity, marketing efforts to promote the variety of attractions available, the addressing of capacity issues, and scaled up conservation efforts is urgent. This is a critical time for Izabal and without proper planning there are major risks inherent in this situation.

While many efforts exist in Izabal to further destination stewardship, the promotion of community tourism, and conserve the area's natural resources, they are fragmented and have yet to coordinate efforts to help position Izabal as a world-class, stay-over destination. On behalf of the USAID-CCAW Program, Solimar aimed to address this fragmentation through implementing collective activities aimed at achieving the following major objectives for the destination:

- Formalize sustainable tourism clusters with key public and private sector groups supported by Destination Management Organizations to strengthen business linkages and improve the environmental performance of tourism actors;
- Establish strategic partnerships with cruise ship ground handlers to raise ground handlers' awareness and support of key conservation issues and improve environmental sustainability in protected areas and buffer zones; and
- Design a travel philanthropy trust to generate funds to support conservation in protected areas and their buffer zones in the Gulf of Honduras watershed. A

travel philanthropy trust is a voluntary funding mechanism in which travelers can donate to support the conservation of the destinations they visit.

This final report further discusses the activities above that were carried out during Solimar's period of implementation from March 2009 through November 2009. The report begins with Section 1, which provides a narrative-style overview of the methodology applied and the impacts achieved—broken down into the seven main activities of the program. Section 2 provides a more condensed, bulleted list of the major accomplishments achieved, and Section 3 discusses the key lessons learned during the life of the program. Together, these sections provide a complete summary of Solimar's implementation of a sustainable tourism development program and the activities, results, and successes achieved during nine months of implementation work on the ground.

SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY AND IMPACTS ACHIEVED

Tourism is a valuable tool for environmental conservation. Because of its income-generating potential and other benefits, tourism encourages a variety of stakeholders (including government, the private sector, NGOs, and local communities) to value and protect the resource base on which tourism often depends.

SCOPE OF WORK

The chart below provides a breakdown of main sustainable tourism activities implemented in Izabal, Guatemala through the USAID-CCAW program. Activities carried out are organized by section number in the left column of the table. The right column displays the corresponding page number indicating the location of the detailed description of each activity—including the methodology applied and major results achieved—within the final report.

SECTION NUMBER	MAIN ACTIVITY	STATUS	PAGE # FOR MORE INFO
1.1	Conduct a Geotourism Needs and Threats Analysis	Completed	6
1.2	Develop and implement a business model for the destination management organization and travel philanthropy trust	Completed	7
1.3	Formalize a sustainable tourism cluster in Izabal, Guatemala with key public and private sector groups	Completed	9
1.4	Develop a DMO destination marketing program, membership program, and tourism information center guidelines	Completed	13
1.5	Travel Philanthropy Trust mechanism designed for the Izabal area	Completed	18
1.6	Conservation awareness video and travel philanthropy collateral materials developed with local content and distributed	Completed	22
1.7	At least one cruise line ground handler company with improved environmental performance and at least twenty-five licensed guides trained to incorporate environmental conservation into tours and encourage travel philanthropy	Completed	25

1.1. Conduct a Geotourism Needs and Threats Assessment

During the initial phase of the program, a geotourism needs and threats assessment was conducted to identify the major issues, threats, challenges, and opportunities for tourism in Izabal. Maria Mitzy Campesecco, Solimar consultant and resident of Guatemala, conducted the following activities to complete the assessment:

Geotourism is defined by the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations as "*tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.*"

- Interviewed key public and private sector stakeholders and conservation organizations to assess the needs and threats facing the tourism industry;
- Compiled an inventory of existing and potential tourism attractions and activities;
- Visited communities and their corresponding geotourism sites to assess, observe and/or participate in existing tourism activities and inventory infrastructure;
- Surveyed a sample of international tourists to assess market demand; and
- Identified major conservation threats to the region and opportunities to use tourism as a tool to mitigate these threats.

This assessment served as a foundation for remaining activities through identifying key priorities and opportunities upon which the tourism clusters formed through the USAID-CCAW program should focus their efforts. Through identifying major attractions and conservation organizations working in the region, this assessment also facilitated the creative direction provided to produce conservation awareness video (described further in activity 1.6).

Establishing a destination management organization was explored thoroughly during the assessment process. The purpose of the DMO is to create a participatory environment where members of the public and private sector come together to discuss the priorities and issues surrounding the destination and work towards collective solutions. The DMO initiative received a great amount of positive feedback from local stakeholders due to the recognized need for such an organization to represent the destination of Izabal and manage collective marketing and conservation efforts.

To respond to this critical need, Solimar considered various models of destination management around the world along with the feedback from local tourism stakeholders. Based on this research and analysis, it was determined that the model with the optimum chance of success was to bring together a consortium of various private sector associations, NGOs, government initiatives, and community-based organizations to create a Geotourism Stewardship Council that unites tourism promotion, conservation, and community empowerment through sustainable tourism development while ensuring its long-term sustainability.

1.2. Develop and implement a business model for the destination management organization and travel philanthropy trust

In May 2009, detailed business models were written for both the destination management organization (the Izabal Geotourism Alliance) and the travel philanthropy trust (the Izabal Conservation Fund). While related, these entities serve separate purposes and have separate operational and marketing strategies, which are discussed in greater detail below.

The **Izabal Geotourism Alliance (IGA)** is the umbrella organization comprised of members throughout the Izabal region dedicated to working with travelers and the travel industry to protect and conserve Izabal's natural and cultural resources through sustainable tourism development and promotion. The Geotourism Stewardship Councils formed during the beginning stages of the program represent the leaders and decision-makers of this Alliance.

The objectives of the IGA were determined through inputs from the Geotourism Stewardship Councils. It was determined that the two main objectives of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance are to undertake conservation efforts to preserve the region's natural and cultural resources while supporting marketing efforts of members businesses through a regional marketing program—including tourism information centers and a web site.

One of the conservation initiatives designed to operate under the Izabal Geotourism Alliance is the **Izabal Conservation Fund (ICF)**—a travel philanthropy program that provides travelers with opportunities to make small donations to regional grassroots projects. Donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund will be collected through member businesses of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and in the tourist information centers. The Fund will be managed by a local “consejo” (or Executive Board) consisting of the president and vice president from each of the three Geotourism Stewardship Councils.

Tourist Information Centers

Tourist information centers (TICs) established at strategic locations throughout Izabal allow the Izabal Geotourism Alliance to provide in-depth information on the region's sustainable tourism offerings and allow travelers to consult, arrange, and potentially purchase pre-packaged tours, accommodations, and guiding services. The information centers will promote the variety of attractions available within the destination (including community-based initiatives), thus reducing the over-crowding and capacity issues that the more popular attractions (including the Mayan archeological site of Quirigua) are facing. The TICs will also provide information to visitors about how they can minimize their environmental impact through strategic partnerships with local conservation organizations. In addition to benefitting travelers to the region, these information centers provide invaluable exposure and market access to members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and serve as a visible incentive for businesses to become involved in the Alliance. To generate sources of revenue, the opportunity also exists for the tourism information centers to sell fair trade, locally produced merchandise, souvenirs and

handicrafts—and serve as an additional point of collection for donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund.

Sustainability

There are a number of benefits to legally registering the destination management organization established through the USAID-CCAW program. Status as a legal entity provides structure and legitimacy to the organization and helps to establish a greater sense of ownership among those involved on the ground—thus helping to ensure its sustainability. Establishing itself as a legal entity also allows the IGA to apply for grant funding and open bank accounts dedicated to money collected in support of the Izabal Conservation Fund.

Destination stewardship is not a new concept, and there are a variety of organizations already working in Izabal to in support of conservation, product development, and local community groups. During the assessment process, a number of organizations were identified as potential organizations that could serve as partners for establishing a destination management organization. The original strategy was to register the IGA under the Livingston CATUR, an already established legal entity. After further assessment it was determined that this would create a number of issues through alienating members from other areas (such as Rio Dulce and Puerto Barrios) due to conflict of interest, which is incongruous to the goal of establishing unity within the region through a region-wide Alliance.

It was therefore determined to create a separate, region-wide entity through registering the Izabal Geotourism Alliance as an Asociación, or NGO. The registration process takes approximately two months and is currently underway. The President and Vice President of each Geotourism Stewardship Council will become shareholders in the corporation, which will further their sense of ownership and foster a sense of regional unity, which is critically needed in Izabal. The Izabal Conservation Fund will also be included as a subsidiary of the organization, serving to greatly increase transparency of the Fund.

The shareholders of the corporation will serve as the DMO's board of directors and make decisions on behalf of general membership. This group will ensure that the initiative begun by the USAID-CCAW program is sustained and continues to address conservation and tourism development issues in the region.

1.3. Formalize a sustainable tourism cluster in Izabal, Guatemala with key public and private sector groups

To compete in today's environment, destinations need to look at a new and integrated approach to development used by economic suppliers worldwide that focuses on "clustering", or the continuous engagement of all stakeholders in a process of learning and innovating how they deliver their services. As such, one of the main objectives of the sustainable tourism component of the USAID-CCAW program in Izabal was to establish a formal cluster—known as a destination management organization—for the region.

The purpose of the DMO is to create a participatory environment where a diverse group of stakeholders come together to discuss the priorities and issues surrounding the destinations and work towards collective solutions. DMOs also have the collective ability to create a brand for the entire community and create continuous awareness of and demand for the tourism "product." The DMO established for Izabal serves as a coordinating entity to attract visitors to their area while working collaboratively to address conservation issues.

The first step in formally establishing the DMO for Izabal was to obtain letters of commitment from destination stewards agreeing to serve as a member of one of the local Geotourism Stewardship Councils. It was determined that three individual Councils would be formed within Izabal to focus on the following specific destinations: Livingston, Rio Dulce, and Puerto Barrios.

The formation of Geotourism Stewardship Councils is based upon a methodology developed by the National Geographic Society Center for Sustainable Destinations. It is guided by the principles of 'geotourism'—defined by National Geographic as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well being of its residents. Solimar has been appointed as a Geotourism Ambassador by National Geographic and favors this approach because it has the potential to enhance the tourism product in Izabal by bringing together a broad range of tourism stakeholders with different backgrounds to enhance the geographical character of their destination while also planning to protect the resources on which they depend.

Membership information packets were circulated to potential members and close to 30 local leaders—representing local businesses, indigenous community-based tourism groups, artisans, farmers, transportation providers, and NGO's—agreed to serve on a local Geotourism Stewardship Council based upon their commitment to the sustainable development and conservation of Izabal.

In August 2009, a series of meetings were convened with each of the three Geotourism Stewardship Councils. Prior to these meetings, an online survey was sent to all members to help gather local inputs and opinions on destination issues and possible solutions, the name of the DMO and the proposed travel philanthropy fund, whether the DMO should implement a cooperative marketing program for the region, among other topics.

During this workshop, the overall objectives and activities of the USAID-CCAW program were introduced to the councils. The facilitators also helped council members recognize the importance of working together and the potential impacts of their non-financial resources when pooled together. The results of the online survey served as discussion points during the meetings where the facilitators were able to help the councils achieve consensus and agree upon major next steps. The councils collectively agreed upon a name of their alliance (the Izabal Geotourism Alliance) as well as the proposed travel philanthropy initiative (the Izabal Conservation Fund), and were supportive of the idea to create a cooperative marketing program to help market the destination of Izabal.



*Meeting with the Puerto Barrios
Geotourism Stewardship Council on
August 19, 2009*

The majority of stakeholders expressed a need to address waste management issues while also providing more information to tourists on the available attractions and tourism businesses through opening tourist information centers. Once the universe of issues, opportunities, and potential solutions was understood, Solimar facilitated the formation of the following local action committees to work towards collective solutions:

- **Rio Dulce:** Tourist Information Center Committee and Solid Waste Management Committee
- **Livingston:** Tourist Information Center Committee, Local Cultural Committee, and Solid Waste Committee
- **Puerto Barrios:** Tourist Information Center Committee and Local Waste Management Committee

These local action committees have already begun taking immediate actions with tremendous results. For example, Solimar has assisted the waste management committee with a number of projects. The first project implemented was a plastic bottle reduction campaign through the promotion of “Yo Relleno: I Refill”. A survey found that each visitor to Izabal consumes an average of four bottles of water each day. The goal of this campaign is to encourage both visitors and locals to re-use their plastic water bottles through refilling them through several points (such as restaurants, hotels, etc.) in the region. To date, over 20 local businesses have agreed to participate in this campaign and the posters below have been distributed throughout the region to promote the campaign.



There is little knowledge among most of the local population of how their behavior can negatively impact the environment. To address this issue, Solimar worked with the solid waste committees in Puerto Barrios and Livingston to develop a project proposal entitled “Rescatamos las playas de Livingston: Rescue the beaches of Livingston,” which has been sent to both the Cerveceria Centro-Americana and also the local municipal government of Livingston. This pilot project involves working with several local families to educate them on how to properly manage and separate waste, clean the beach, and will eventually give them the tools to recycle plastic bottles in exchange for food products as incentive. The goal of the project is working with a small number of families with a focus on environmental education through local community leaders, with a larger future vision of working towards keeping the beaches and natural attractions of Izabal cleaner and thus more appealing to visitors.

The Livingston tourist information center action committee has been working to enhance the visitor’s first impression of Livingston not only through the creation of the information center but also through improving security and order on the municipal dock. A petition was created asking the municipal government to restrict access to the dock to passengers and authorized personal to create a more welcoming, organized, and safe environment. This petition was distributed to members of the TIC action committee and over 50 signatures were collected. These signatures will be formally presented to the Mayor of Livingston by the President of the Livingston Geotourism Council and the Solimar staff with the hopes that visitors and community members will no longer be harassed by hustlers and hawkers that surround boats upon arrival.

The Livingston Cultural Committee organized the first ever “fiesta cultural” in Livingston. This fiesta took place on Wednesday, November 18th and featured three tents with music, dancing, and arts and crafts representing ten different musical groups and artisans from the community. The committee hopes that this festival will become a

weekly event, catering to the cruise ship passengers while also celebrating and encouraging local culture and traditions. The committee worked with the mayor of Livingston to approve the “fiesta cultural”, and they continue to build upon this important relationship with the local government. The Cultural Committee is also working on developing other potential ideas to celebrate local culture such as having a “Domingo Cultural” or “Cultural Sunday” in the park, and improving the publicity and marketing of local festivals and events such as the Dia de Garifuna (Garifuna Day) on November 26th.

Solimar assisted representatives from the Puerto Barrios Waste Management Committee present a pitch to the National Beer Company (la Cerveceria Centroamericana) to install a plastic grinder in Puerto Barrios and implement their existing recycling program of giving food in exchange for turning in plastic bottles. While the Cerveceria is unable to install a plastic recycling plant in Puerto Barrios at this time, they were very enthusiastic about the Alliance and collaborated with the action committee on the recycling pilot project detailed above. There is hope that this project will develop into a long-term relationship between the waste management committee and the Cerveceria, allowing for a more complete analysis of the feasibility of building a plastic recycling plant in Puerto Barrios. Building such a plant takes up to 5 years and requires a great deal of capital investment, but the fact that the Cerveceria has initiated a working relationship with the local action committee indicates that this may be a possibility in the future.

Locations for information Centers were also identified for Livingston, Rio Dulce, and Puerto Barrios, with painting and construction activities beginning in September 2009. The Puerto Barrios tourist information center action committee identified an office space within Mar Y Sol—centrally located near the municipal dock in Puerto Barrios—to house the Puerto Barrios tourist information center. On September 22nd, members of the Puerto Barrios Tourist information center action committee painted the space within the Mar y Sol office dedicated for the tourist information center in order to improve its appearance and prepare it to receive visitors.



Members of the Puerto Barrios Geotourism Stewardship Council and the Solimar team paint the tourist information center office located within Mar Y Sol

1.4. Develop DMO membership program, marketing program, and information center guidelines

A larger, more active DMO is the best way to mobilize a broad range of actors within a destination to work collaboratively. After the Izabal Geotourism Alliance was formed and local stakeholders agreed upon the importance of collaborative marketing efforts, the Alliance was expanded to invite other stakeholders to join their efforts through a membership program.

Over 90 local non-profit organizations, hotels, natural attractions, community-run sites, cultural centers and restaurants were targeted for membership in the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and encouraged to join with the following benefits serving as an incentive:

- Full page promotional description on a new Web site (www.discoverizabal.com) promoting Izabal as a world-class Geotourism destination;
- Right to distribute sales brochures of tourism facilities at the tourist information center locations;
- Business linkages with local and international tour operators to promote sustainable tourism activities in the region;
- Access to hotel and activities booking services through the tourist information center locations;
- Special distinction as a tourism business supporting sustainable tourism initiatives in Izabal through use of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance logo;
- A feature business listing in a Sales Directory made available to visitors at the tourism information center locations; and
- Opportunity to be featured in press and familiarization (FAM) trips.

Laura Burns, USAID-CCAW Marketing Coordinator, visited many of the businesses targeted for membership to discuss the overall objectives of the USAID-CCAW program and encourage their membership in the Alliance. A colorful membership kit was given to all potential members that explained the benefits above. In exchange for the membership benefits, all participating members were asked to encourage and collect donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund. While not mandatory, a number of businesses have agreed to help solicit donations in support of the Conservation Fund.

Through the support of the USAID-CCAW Program, the Izabal Geotourism Alliance has already recruited over 60 members. Generally speaking, local businesses showed great interest in this Alliance, in large part because of the marketing possibilities but also because they recognize the importance of conserving the destination for future generations. Izabal is called the Green Caribbean because it contains more protected areas than any other part of Guatemala, and potential members realize that these natural attractions drawing visitors to the region are in danger of disappearing if actions are not taken to adopt more sustainable practices.

The group of members is diverse, and include ecolodges, small hotels, exclusive resorts, and community-based tourism products. Many members lack sufficient resources and

expertise to effectively market their businesses, yet all of them realize the great importance of doing so and were thrilled with the possibility of having their business featured on a web site. Many of the attractions and hotels in the area are difficult to access, and are located up creeks or deep in the jungle. While this is part of what makes the region unique, hotels and communities understand that the current lack of information and infrastructure combined with their remote locations greatly prohibits their potential earnings. They understand the importance of promoting themselves collectively through a Web site and information centers and believe it has the potential to dramatically increase the number of visitors to their businesses.

Name and Logo Design

Full-color logos to brand both the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and the Izabal Conservation Fund were developed through an extensive process involving inputs and feedback from the members of the Geotourism Stewardship Councils as well as the greater Izabal community. The two logos feature key colors, elements, and overall themes recommended by local stakeholders as conveying a strong feel for the region. The Izabal Conservation Fund logo will be used on consumer focused marketing collateral to encourage donations, while the Izabal Geotourism Alliance logo will be used in membership materials, as well as among the tourism industry members in order to show membership in the alliance and support of sustainable tourism initiatives.

The process for developing these names, logos and tagline began with the initial Geotourism Stewardship Council meetings in July, 2009. This was followed by a branding survey conducted via email and in person among local stakeholders during the month of August. This ensured that inputs from a wide variety of people were considered prior to developing the logo concepts.

The survey results were aggregated to produce a comprehensive list of symbols, features, colors and words that people associate with Izabal. Based on the results of these surveys, logo concepts were developed for both the Alliance and for the Izabal Conservation Fund. The colors of both logos were based on the survey results as well as the color of the Garifuna flag (yellow, white and black). The style and square design are representative of the Mayan carvings at Quirigua—which was mentioned frequently in the survey as a symbol representative of the region.

The Geotourism Alliance logo incorporates more cultural elements—including Garifuna women dancing and bottles of *guifiti*, the traditional drink of the Garifuna (a medicinal drink made with plant-infused rum). The Izabal Conservation Fund logo focuses more on nature—including local wildlife, the sun, and the lake. Both logos were designed in horizontal and vertical format to adapt to a variety of uses.



Consumer-Focused Web site

Travelers rely on destination web sites as a valued information source, and are likely to rank destination sites as the most useful type of travel Web site for researching a possible vacation destination. The centerpiece of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance's marketing strategy is a comprehensive, consumer-focused Web site (www.discoverizabal.com) for the destination of Izabal. This new destination portal provides the detailed information about activities and accommodations that the current sites promoting Izabal are lacking.

Solimar initially researched the possibility of modifying www.Izabalonline.com, the existing web site promoting the destination (the site is currently managed by FUNDAECO). Most members of the Geotourism Stewardship Councils agreed that the main navigation of the site needs restructuring and the content needs updating—including increasing the number of hotels and the amount of information available about each hotel. Other feedback received included updating the destination and natural attractions pages while making them more consumer-friendly for visitors planning a trip.

Due to limitations with this site (confusing navigational structure, limited information about businesses, outdated web site platform, etc), it was decided that the Izabal Geotourism Alliance should create and market its own site—focused on promoting its members and Izabal as a world-class geotourism destination. The Izabal Conservation Fund and its beneficiaries will also be predominantly featured on this site. The home page for this web site is featured below.



As local businesses joined the Izabal Geotourism Alliance, Solimar collected detailed content on each one based on a content collection for—including activities, communities, hotels, natural attractions, restaurants, and tour operators. All content collected in the field was aggregated by Solimar’s Washington DC team and uploaded into the back-end of the website. Upon the conclusion of the USAID-CCAW program, a comprehensive training (including print and video instructions) was delivered to the local webmaster identified for the site to ensure that it remains updated with current content and new member businesses.

The launch of the Web site was followed by an aggressive electronic marketing and public relations campaign to drive traffic to the site. Search Engine Optimization (SEO), search engine registration, online advertising (Pay Per Click online ads, Google Ad words and Yahoo Sponsored search), electronic fliers, forum postings, affinity group promotion and distribution on travel portals will be used on an ongoing basis to build brand awareness with prospective consumers and encourage them to visit the Web site to research a trip to Izabal.

Accommodations and Activities Guides

Attractive sales sheets for products offered by IGA members (including hotels, day tours, restaurants, etc.) were designed, laminated and placed into a binder. These accommodations and activities guides are made available for travelers to browse through while relaxing inside the Tourism Information Centers. Travelers may make reservations with the assistance of an agent working at the Tourism Information Center or directly with the IGA member.

Tourism Information Center Guidelines

While establishing information centers is key to delivering the marketing benefits described above, they often come with a number of overhead costs. Traditional DMO models are able to cover the costs of operating an information center through revenues generated by way of membership fees and commissions. While this is typically a good strategy, adjustments were required to adapt to the realities of Izabal and it was determined that these centers should have minimal overhead costs to be sustainable. This decision was reached after collecting membership fees and commissions was deemed unrealistic.

To respond to the local situation, Solimar developed an innovative approach to open tourist information centers in Livingston, Puerto Barrios, and Rio Dulce with little to no overhead costs. Solimar field staff, along with the TIC action committees, developed strategic partnerships with the following businesses and local NGOs to implement the centers:

Livingston Tourist Information Center

The Livingston tourist information center was established through a strategic partnership with Ak’Tenamit, a grass roots organization run by and for the advancement of the local Mayan communities. Ak’Tenamit owns and operates Restaurante La Buga on Calle

Principal in downtown Livingston that had space available to create a tourist information kiosk inside. In exchange for the marketing information and promotion of the restaurant as the “official information center of Livingston”, Ak’Tenamit agreed to provide space for the information center kiosk, a staff person to answer questions about IGA members and regional attractions, and will encourage donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund through a donation collection box and the sale of gift cards. The benefits for Ak’Tenamit in this partnership include increased visitation to their new restaurant, hands-on customer service experience for their students that serve as staff members, and income generation through merchandise and handicraft sales.

Puerto Barrios Tourist Information Center

A tourist information center was established in Puerto Barrios through a strategic partnership with Mar y Sol, a local tour operator, and Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO), a Guatemalan-based NGO dedicated to nature conservation and poverty alleviation. The information center is centrally located in the office of Mar y Sol, adjacent to the municipal dock where the majority of tourists pass by that are coming to and from the city. In the franchise agreement entered with Mar y Sol, they agreed to provide space for the tourist information center for free for one year and also encourage donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund. While the location was ideal, overhead costs were inevitable to operate this information center after the first year. Therefore, a strategic partnership was formed with FUNDAECO who agreed to cover the cost of rent after the first year and hire a staff member that could educate visitors about the protected areas while also providing information and referrals to IGA member businesses. The benefits for FUNDAECO include higher visibility of their organization in the region, income generation through merchandise and handicraft sales, and the ability to educate the public about the protected areas.

Rio Dulce Information Center

SunDog café serves as the information center location for the Rio Dulce area. SunDog café is located near the municipal dock and also a short walk from the bus station in the town of Fronteras, so it has an ideal location and is also a popular hangout for many travelers and boaters in the area. The friendly staff (who speak English, German, and Spanish fluently) make information available about local attractions and IGA members.

1.5. Design a travelers philanthropy fund mechanism for the region

An increasing number of travelers are seeking to positively impact the communities and environments of the places they visit. Providing financial donations in support of local conservation activities is one of the most effective ways that travelers can make a difference. This concept has led to a new source of international development aid known as “travelers’ philanthropy”. The tourism industry (including individual businesses) is also becoming increasingly motivated to establish and support these programs in order to protect their local environment and safeguard their business investments.

Objective of the Izabal Conservation Fund

The main reason that people are visiting Izabal is to experience the wonderful and natural cultural resources (including protected areas, wildlife, mayan ruins, the Garifuna culture) unique to this particular destination. There are a number of active organizations working in Izabal to protect these natural and cultural resources and mitigate some of the major threats to the region. Established as a partnership between the Izabal Geotourism Alliance, the Mesoamerican Reef Fund (MAR Fund), and the traveling public, the Izabal Conservation Fund will serve as a mechanism to link travelers with local grassroots organizations and give them the opportunity to provide financial support to Izabal-based conservation activities. These donations will provide new sources of funding to locally run, grassroots projects doing meaningful work in the destination that may not have access to funding through traditional channels. Local tourism stakeholders will indicate their priorities for these funds through their participation on an Executive Board. Funds will be collected (primarily from travelers) on a voluntary basis.

MAR Fund was selected as the administrating partner for the Izabal Conservation Fund due to its governing principles, complimentary objectives, and experience in distributing funds to approved projects in the Mesoamerican Reef region. MAR Fund is financial mechanism that raises and allocates funds to support conservation and sustainable use of resources in the Mesoamerican Reef Ecoregion. The organization is registered in the United States as a 501 (c)(3), commonly referred to as a *charitable organization*.

As the administrator of the Izabal Conservation Fund, MAR Fund will open three interest-bearing bank accounts (one in the US in dollars, one in Guatemala in dollars, and one in Guatemala in Quetzals) under their existing legal structure dedicated specifically to all funds collected by the Izabal Conservation Fund. Although the Izabal Conservation Fund will be housed within MAR Fund, and makes use of its operation mechanisms, it will be an independent entity. This means that the funds generated for the Izabal Conservation Fund will be kept separate from the funds of MAR Fund, and the decision-making power of the Izabal Conservation Fund will be independent from that of the MAR Fund. The Izabal Conservation Fund will be authorized to use the name and logo of MAR Fund to help establish credibility.

El Consejo (the Executive Board)

The overall role of the Consejo is to make all decisions on behalf of the Izabal Conservation Fund. The Consejo is comprised of the President and Vice President of each Geotourism Stewardship Council as well as representatives from MAR Fund, CONAP, and INGUAT. The Consejo member from MAR Fund will act as secretary to the Consejo, with a voice but not a vote. The MAR Fund representative will attend meetings to provide technical assistance and monitor the actions of the Consejo. The representative from INGUAT will also attend meetings and provide technical assistance and a voice in discussions but will not have a vote either.

Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries of the Izabal Conservation Fund can be either predetermined (for example, an organization like FUNDAECO) or selected through a “call for proposals”, or a combination of both. In the instance where beneficiaries are predetermined, the organizations will be asked to submit a workplan and budget indicating how they will use the Funds. If the Consejo approves the workplan, a defined percentage of the annual amount collected will be granted to the beneficiary. Alternatively, the Izabal Conservation Fund could facilitate a competitive process for awarding funding through a “call for proposals”. These calls could be for specific areas of focus (i.e. waste management, conservation of endangered species, etc.) according to the needs and priorities as defined by the Consejo.

Summary of the Izabal Conservation Fund Program Structure



Collecting Donations

Donations will be collected through the following four mechanisms:

1. Izabal Geotourism Alliance Business Members
2. Tourist Information Centers
3. Booth at Cruise Port
4. Online

Izabal Geotourism Alliance Business Members

Business members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance are given two options in which they can encourage travel philanthropy and collect donations for the Izabal Conservation Fund:

- **Voluntary Donations** - Voluntary opt-in or opt-out programs will provide the guests of member businesses with an opportunity to support the initiative by adding a \$2.00 fee to their invoice. Hoteliers, for example, will add \$2.00 per night upon check-out as an add-on to each guest's invoice. Guests will be informed of the program upon check-in and can opt-out upon check-out, after they have had the opportunity to experience the destination. This will be established as an opt-out program as travel and tourism businesses that include a fee in guest invoices as a voluntary opt-out have been more successful than those who offer them as a voluntary opt-in.
- **Gift Cards** - Members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance are also given the option to sell gift cards of various amounts to their guests. Tour Guides will also serve as an important way for soliciting donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund, especially from cruise line passengers that typically do not stay in local hotels or eat at local restaurants. Through the USAID-CCAW program, tour guides were trained on how to incorporate conservation messages into each of the tours they are leading, and encourage visitors to donate to the Izabal Conservation Fund at the end of each tour.



Tourism Information Centers

Donations to the Izabal Conservation Fund will also be collected through donation boxes and the sale of gift cards at the three information center locations.

Booth at Cruise Port

Through discussions with the authorities of the Puerto Santo Tomas and INGUAT, Solimar (on behalf of the IGA) has secured the donation of a space in the cruise ship port for the next cruise ship season. While the space will be donated, the booth will need to be constructed, although the costs for this construction are minimal. This booth will be a crucial area to solicit donations, provide information about the fund, and also show the conservation awareness video.

Online

The use of a Web site is an essential component to the collection strategy for donations. A specific page for the Izabal Conservation Fund will be set up on MAR Fund's web site, with an online donation option through Paypal. The Izabal Conservation Fund will also be promoted in the www.discoverizabal.com web site.

As funds accumulate, member businesses will be asked to periodically (monthly or bi-monthly, depending on the amount generated) deposit the donations into a bank account opened for the Izabal Conservation Fund in Guatemala. The position of a Fund Manager was also created to assist in the collection of donations and to ensure that the money collected from gift card sales is audited and fully accounted for. The Fund Manager is a paid part-time position that would be paid, and interviews are currently being conducted. The Fund Manager could also potentially serve as the staff person at the information booth inside the cruise ship port.

FUNDAECO, Eco Rio, Ak'Tenamit, Garifuna Association of Livingston, and Defensores de la Naturaleza are some of the most active organizations working to protect natural resources in the area—and are examples of potential beneficiaries of funding generated.

1.6. Conservation Awareness Video and Travel Philanthropy collateral materials developed with local content and distributed

Conservation Awareness Video

One of the most tangible outcomes achieved during the limited time of the USAID-CCAW program was the filming and production of two promotional conservation awareness videos by South Shore Productions. These videos were created to highlight the main attractions that the destinations of Izabal, Guatemala and Roatán, Honduras have to offer, introduce some of the main conservation threats and organizations working to mitigate them, while also educating travelers on how they can minimize their impact and contribute to ongoing conservation efforts. Final versions of the videos can be viewed at the following links:

Roatán, Honduras - <http://www.vimeo.com/7583698>

Guatemala - <http://www.vimeo.com/7672295>

The Roatán conservation awareness video will be distributed only if and when distribution is approved by USAID. Once the video has been finalized Solimar will request their guidance regarding distribution.

Solimar was unable to obtain letters of commitment to distribute the Izabal video due to our inability to share the final version with potential project partners prior to the end of the program (videos were finalized in early November, 2009). Several preliminary discussions have taken place, however, and Solimar will distribute the video through the following outlets once it is finalized:

Online

The Izabal conservation awareness video will be featured on the www.discoverizabal.com web site on both the homepage as well as through a section of the site dedicated to conservation. The video will also be made available to all business members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance to include on their web sites and uploaded onto www.youtube.com, which is the second most searched engine (behind Google).

Staterooms/Guestrooms

The conservation awareness videos will also be distributed in staterooms through a number cruise ships visiting both destinations. Solimar has been reaching out to a variety of cruise line companies to ascertain whether there is an interest in showing the video in staterooms.

Solimar is also working through our contacts at the Florida Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) to reach multiple cruise line companies that are members of this association.

Izabal Geotourism Alliance Members

The conservation awareness video for Izabal will be made available to each of the 60+ Izabal Geotourism Alliance members to show in their lobby, restaurant, guestrooms, and in vehicles when transporting travelers to attractions.

Izabal Conservation Fund Marketing Materials

Through the graphic design assistance of Sustainable Travel International, gift cards and rack cards were developed to increase awareness of the Izabal Conservation Fund and encourage donations.

Rack Cards (brochures)

A simple yet visually attractive 4x9 rack card that is both informative and readable was developed to promote the Izabal Conservation Fund. The front of the rack card is pictured right.

Gift Cards

Sustainable Travel International developed charitable gift cards for travelers to support the initiative. Gift cards will be available through several members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance in three incremental amounts (\$5, \$10, and \$25) and will be allocated as a general gift to the Izabal Conservation Fund. Photographs from Ak'tenamit were used to visually depict potential beneficiaries of donations. Cards will be printed in a pre-numbered series in order to place controls around the collection of money for the cards. A small portion of funds generated for the Izabal Conservation Fund will be earmarked for the re-printing of gift cards.

Distribution

Due to the complexity and time required to properly establish a travel philanthropy fund, the Izabal Conservation Fund does not yet have the process in place to ensure it will be managed responsibly. This will require 1-2 years of outside monitoring and assistance by both the Executive Board of the Fund as well as MAR Fund (the administrator). The valuable designs produced for the printed materials will be handed over to the Executive Board to use once the fund is established.

Once printed, rack cards can be distributed through members of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and placed in a brochure holder (displayed on the front counter of the hotel/restaurant) that includes a membership certificate stating: *"This business is a proud member of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance. Ask how you can support the Izabal Conservation Fund"*. To date, the following Izabal Geotourism Alliance members have informally agreed to support the Izabal Conservation Fund through the distribution of marketing materials and solicitation of donations:

- **Amatique Bay** (hotel) has agreed to both sell gift cards and include a \$2 voluntary "opt-out" donation on the invoices of all clients;
- **Sun Dog Café** (restaurant/café) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Lagunita El Salvador** (community-based accommodation and tour provider) has agreed to sell gift cards;



- **GilResort** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Villa Caribe** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **FUNDAECO** (NGO) has agreed to sell gift cards and collect donations;
- **MarBrissa** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards and include a \$2 voluntary “opt-out” donation on all invoices of clients;
- **Buga Mama** (restaurant) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Catamaran** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Nana Juana** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Sand Bay** (natural attraction/restaurant) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Green Bay** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Posada Delfin** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Las Escobas** (natural attraction) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Nutria Marina** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards;
- **Hacienda Tijax** (hotel) has agreed to sell gift cards; and
- **Salvador Gaviota** (hotel/natural attraction) has agreed to sell gift cards.

Rack cards and the sale of gift cards should also be available through the three tourism information center locations (in Puerto Barrios, Rio Dulce, and Livingston) established through the support of the USAID-CCAW program.

1.7. At least one cruise line ground handler company with improved environmental performance and at least twenty-five licensed guides trained to incorporate environmental conservation into tours and encourage travel philanthropy

As part of the USAID-CCAW program, Solimar International delivered a training program to employees from local tour operator companies as well as tour guides from both Izabal and Guatemala City with the goal of improving their environmental performance. The majority of the tour guides and the tour operator companies who were trained work directly with cruise ship passengers, managing and leading their day-tour activities when in the Izabal region. INGUAT estimates that of the 76,800 annual cruise ship visitors, approximately half of them take a day tour. With such a large number of visitors, this training program will directly improve the management of the Izabal Watershed and the protection of the biodiversity of Izabal by helping tour guides and tour operators minimize the environmental footprint of tourists in this fragile region. To achieve this objective, local tour guides and tour operators were trained in the following:

- Identifying basic threats to the environment that result from tourism activities;
- Introduction to the *Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria* (<http://www.sustainabletourismcriteria.org/>) and the *Ocean Conservation and Tourism Alliance's criteria for sustainable and marine-based tours*;
- Understanding how to achieve the criteria above through implementing sustainable tourism best practices to mitigate conservation threats;
- What is “Geotourism” and how it can be used to differentiate products from the competitors;
- What are travel philanthropy programs and how they can be utilized to support the protection and enhancement of tourism assets;
- Understanding the role that tour operators and tour guides play in travel philanthropy programs and inspiring visitors to donate;
- How to define potential beneficiaries of travel philanthropy in the areas where they are working; and
- Understanding the four basic ways to solicit donations from clients.

The trainings took place in a series of 2-day workshops in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, on September 26-27 (tour guide training) and September 29-30 (tour operator training).

Tour Guide Training

After the training, 38 tour guides (almost all of whom work with cruise ship passengers) were more aware of their environmental impact in the region of Izabal. Not only do these guides now possess specific knowledge of environmental threats in the area and the fragile nature of the biodiversity in the region, but they also possess the tools to mitigate those threats and the ability to directly contribute to long-term conservation projects in Izabal through helping solicit donations to the Conservation Fund. The guides now understand the concepts of Sustainable Tourism, Geotourism, and Traveler's Philanthropy Funds.

During the training, the guides created a number of creative ideas and solutions to mitigate environmental and cultural threats in Izabal. Those ideas included:

- Reduce the number of tourists on each tour;
- Reduce the number of tours to each attraction or place to be visited;
- Support the creation and implementation of a “Code of Conduct” for the Izabal area;
- Promote and support recycling programs within the tourism attractions;
- Support the local community projects;
- Reduce the number of water or land craft vehicles used for tours;
- Use a route planning program to reduce the traffic and fuel consumption;
- Join the Izabal Geotourism Alliance to show support of the promotion of sustainable tours, geotourism, and green certification programs in the Izabal area;
- Support monitoring activities with local conservation organizations; and
- Encourage visitors to donate to the Izabal Conservation Fund.

Tour Operator Training

15 tour operators, representing eight different companies, were trained in Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria and how they can improve their practices to minimize the environmental impact of their tours. These tour operators are directly responsible for designing the tours for cruise ship passengers in the region. Making them aware of their environmental impact and giving them the tools to mitigate that impact is a key step in minimizing the potential damage tourists can cause and also in protecting the delicate biodiversity and environment of Izabal for years to come.

During the training, Tour Operators were asked to sign a Letter of Commitment listing three changes their company promised to make to minimize their environmental impact. Three companies (Eco Ways, Kimarrin, and Amatique Bay) signed Letters of Commitment and listed three changes they are working to make as a result of the training.

The implementation of these changes were monitored by Solimar International through two written reports, field observations, and site visits. The two companies who best implement these practices and changes will be the winners of the “Poner en Práctica las Buenas Prácticas” competition, and will each receive a one-year advertisement on www.responsibletravel.com.



SECTION 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR RESULTS

The Geotourism initiative implemented through the USAID-CCAW program achieved the following major results for improving sustainable tourism in support of biodiversity conservation in Izabal, Guatemala. Major results are organized by the three primary objectives of the program.

Objective #1: Formalize sustainable tourism clusters with key public and private sector groups supported by Destination Management Organizations to strengthen business linkages and improve the environmental performance of tourism actors

- Three local Geotourism Stewardship Councils were created, representing a total of over 30 members who demonstrated a great interest and enthusiasm in promoting, improving, and conserving the destination. These councils represent many diverse sectors, cultures, and stakeholders in Izabal, and the council members are committed to becoming the future leaders of the Izabal Geotourism Alliance and also of the Izabal Conservation Fund.
- Over 60 members were recruited to join the Izabal Geotourism Alliance—17 of which agreed to solicit donations for the Izabal Conservation Fund through the sale of gift cards or adding voluntary “opt-out” donations to customer invoices.
- Content was collected on each of the member businesses to facilitate the creation of a consumer-focused web site and sales manuals to promote Izabal as a world-class Geotourism destination.
- Two franchise agreements were signed with existing organizations to ensure the sustainability of the information centers: Ak’Tenamit in Livingston and FUNDAECO in Puerto Barrios. These agreements are invaluable in terms of the long-term viability of the initiative. FUNDAECO and Ak’Tenamit have both been active in the region for many years, and have the resources to ensure that the information centers continue functioning for many years to come.
- The formation of the Puerto Barrios and Livingston Solid Waste Committees and the design of a plastic bottle reduction campaign through the promotion of “*Yo Relleno: I Refill*”. Over 20 local businesses have agreed to participate in the campaign and posters promoting the project were designed and distributed in the region.

Objective #2: Establish strategic partnerships with cruise ship ground handlers to raise ground handlers’ awareness and support of key conservation issues and improve environmental sustainability in protected areas and buffer zones.

- 38 local tour guides were trained in Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria and on how to deliver conservation messages during their tours. These tour guides work directly with the cruise ship passengers, guiding hundreds of tourists through fragile areas during high season. Giving these guides tools to minimize their impact and creating awareness of said impact is an important step towards mitigating the damage caused by the tourism “*en masse*” the cruise ships represent.

- 15 tour operators, representing 8 different companies, were trained in Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria and how they can improve their practices to minimize the environmental impact of their tours. These tour operators are directly responsible for designing the tours for cruise ship passengers in the region. Making them aware of their environmental impacts and giving them the tools to mitigate that impact is a key step in minimizing the potential damage tourists can cause and also in protecting the delicate biodiversity and environment of Izabal for years to come.
- Three local tour operators signed letters of commitment to improve their business operations and have committed to making three small changes to minimize their environmental impact and become more sustainable.
- A conservation awareness video was created to help cruise line ground handlers highlight the main attractions of Izabal and educate tourists on how they can help conserve the natural and cultural resources of the region.

Objective #3: Design a travel philanthropy trust to generate funds to support conservation in protected areas and their buffer zones in the Gulf of Honduras watershed. A travel philanthropy trust is a voluntary funding mechanism in which travelers can donate to support the conservation of the destinations they visit

- The Izabal Conservation Fund was designed and support for this initiative was obtained from local stakeholders. Marketing materials, collection mechanisms, and logos were also designed to move the concept of the fund into a reality.
- An executive council consisting of 7 members (2 from each stewardship council and a representative from CONAP) was formed that will make decisions on behalf of the Izabal Conservation Fund and carry this initiative forward.
- The commitment from MAR Fund to serve as the administrator of the Izabal Conservation Fund was secured.
- The donation of a space in the cruise ship port (from INGUAT) was secured to promote the Izabal Conservation Fund for next year's cruise ship season.

SECTION 3. LESSONS LEARNED

An overall big-picture success: The USAID-CCAW program, within a relatively short period of time, demonstrated that destination stewardship in support of conservation in Izabal is viable. Although the benefits of USAID-CCAW activities will mostly be realized over the medium-term, rather than the short-term, Solimar managed to build a strong foundation and made significant contributions to conservation awareness and improved destination management across the region. The program helped to stimulate a positive mentality among the diverse group of stakeholders towards sustainable tourism development and conservation, while learning important lessons to apply to future participatory development approaches.

Regional Unification: The regional unification of major tourism stakeholders through the Geotourism Stewardship Councils, Izabal Geotourism Alliance, action committees, and the Izabal Conservation Fund was critical to the success of the program for many reasons. Due to the geography and logistics of Izabal, many businesses are isolated and do not work together to promote or improve the destination, and bringing these stakeholders together through various meetings was a crucial step towards uniting and encouraging the tourism industry in Izabal to protect the region for future generations. Gaining the confidence of the local stakeholders proved to be more time-consuming than in other destinations given the large amount of similar projects that have been conducted in the region. This challenge was overcome through early involvement, continuous communications (i.e. through circulating notes and re-caps after each meeting), frequent meetings, and empowerment of local stakeholders

Sustainability and Local Ownership: The USAID-CCAW program has worked to ensure the sustainability of the initiative, particularly through the formation of strategic alliances and the assignment of leadership roles and responsibilities to the local council members. In the end, however, the sustainability of the initiative is up to the members of the Alliance. If the members are not willing to put in the work necessary to ensure the success of the information centers, website, and Conservation Fund, then the initiative will not work. While little can be done to change local attitudes and culture, training programs on how to maintain the web site and sales manuals were given to local leaders so they have the skills and capabilities necessary to take over the Alliance. It is also critical to involve local stakeholders from the very beginning of the program (through involving them in the assessment process and encouraging their inputs) to instill a sense of local ownership. Solimar also assisted the Alliance to legally register itself to instill a greater sense of ownership. In cases such as Roatán, we also learned that we cannot expect local stakeholders to participate in destination stewardship activities when there are larger problems taking place in their country.

Facilitating vs. Prescribing: To empower local stakeholders at the destination level, it is critical to take time early on to get their inputs on what issues the destination is facing and facilitate the formation of local action committees to work towards collective solutions. The action committees were based on local needs and concerns (not those of the Solimar team) and once given a forum, we were amazed at the results these action

committees were able to collectively achieve. For example, the waste management committee started a recycling campaign to encourage locals and visitors to refill their water bottles in over 20 regional locations (such as hotels and restaurants that have signed on to support the campaign) to reduce the amount of waste from plastic bottles. This wonderful idea, among others, came organically from the local stakeholders, and Solimar was there to help facilitate (and not prescribe) ways to achieve solutions to issues and opportunities that local stakeholders feel so passionately about.

Incentives: While some immediate success stories from the action committees are indicative of a few committed individuals, it cannot be assumed that all stakeholders are going to inherently care about destination stewardship. To involve as many stakeholders as possible in destination stewardship activities, it is critical to offer marketing benefits (such as being featured on the web site created for the initiative and through marketing materials in the information center) as an incentive to encourage local stakeholders to join these destination stewardship efforts—including promoting and collection donations for the Izabal Conservation Fund. Once businesses are part of this alliance, it will also be easier to obtain their commitment and participation to work on various local action committees.