



# USAID CONSERVATION OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WATERSHEDS PROGRAM

**DELIVERABLE NO 11: BOCAS DEL TORO FINAL REPORT  
SUBCONTRACT #EP-I-04-03-00014-03**

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**Submitted By: Solimar International**

**Contact: Natalie Sellier, Program Manager**

1327 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite 320

Washington, DC 20005

Tel: (202) 518-6192 (x104)

Fax: (202) 518-6194

Email: [n.sellier@solimarinternational.com](mailto:n.sellier@solimarinternational.com)

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAMVECONA	Asociación de Amigos y Vecinos de la Costa y la Naturaleza
ACOMUITA	Indigenous Bribrí Women of Talamanca
ATEC	Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation
BSTA	Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance
CCAW	Conservation of Central American Watersheds Program
DMO	Destination Management Organization
NA	Nature Air
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGS	National Geographic Society
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
RA	Rainforest Alliance
STI	Sustainable Travel International
TIC	Tourist Information Center
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WIDECAST	Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Destination Context**

Located on the Caribbean coast of Panama, close to the border with Costa Rica, Bocas del Toro province is a popular tourism destination in Panama. Its archipelago of pristine islands as well as its laid back Caribbean culture has made Bocas del Toro very popular among travelers coming from Panama City or Costa Rica. Although there are no official tourism statistics, the number of visitors is growing and estimated to be around 100,000 per year. The real estate market is booming and significant numbers of European and Americans are purchasing homes on the islands.

With tourism having grown over 70% in the past decade, unplanned tourism development is currently putting tremendous pressure on the area's natural resources. Without addressing the threats from unsustainable tourism development with a sustainable alternative, Bocas del Toro risks losing its pristine environment, which is the area's main attraction and principal reason why tourists visit the archipelago.

### **Program Context**

The Cahuita-La Amistad-Río Cañas-Bocas del Toro watershed (Costa Rica and Panama) 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 December of 2008, Solimar International began providing technical assistance on behalf of the USAID-CCAW program in order to implement a sustainable tourism component in Bocas del Toro through improved destination management. While many efforts exist in Bocas del Toro to further community tourism, conservation, product development, and destination stewardship, they are fragmented and have yet to coordinate efforts to help position Bocas del Toro as a world-class sustainable tourism destination. While improved destination management is not a panacea, it is a step in the right direction towards ensuring the sustainability of Bocas del Toro's precious natural and cultural resources.

This final report covers activities carried out during Solimar's period of implementation from December 2008 through November 2009. The report begins with Section 1, which provides a narrative-style overview of the methodology applied and the impacts achieved through seven main activities of the program. Section 2 provides a more condensed, bulleted list of the major results 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 during its eleven months of implementation.

## 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. During its work on behalf of the USAID-CCAW program, Solimar was tasked with the main objective of bringing these diverse players together through the establishment of a destination management organization (DMO).

### SCOPE OF WORK

The chart below provides a breakdown of main sustainable tourism activities implemented in Bocas del Toro, Panama 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	Formalize a sustainable tourism cluster in Bocas del Toro with key public and private sector groups	Completed	4
1.2	Develop and implement a business model for the destination management organization	Completed	8
1.3	Develop and implement a comprehensive international marketing and branding strategy	Completed	12
1.4	Sustainable Tourism Packages created that establish direct linkages between various groups and the destination management organization	Completed	14
1.5	Expand the customer service capacity and service quality of various groups within the tourism cluster	Completed	15
1.6	Improve the environmental performance of private sector groups within the sustainable tourism cluster	Completed	17
1.7	Create a bi-national sustainable tourism alliance and marketing materials to promote the La Amistad International Peace Park	Completed	18

## **1.1. Formalize a sustainable tourism cluster in Bocas del Toro 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 Bocas del Toro was to establish a destination management organization for the region.

The purpose of the DMO is to create a participatory environment where a diverse group of stakeholders can 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 Bocas del Toro serves as a coordinating entity to attract visitors to their area while working collaboratively to address conservation issues.

Beginning in January 2009, a series of individual meetings and workshops were held with local tourism stakeholders to gauge the need in creating a DMO as well as their desired level of involvement (through serving on various action committees or on the Geotourism Stewardship Council). Many tourism stakeholders were extremely receptive to this initiative and recognized the potential it had to developing a common vision and improving the management of sustainable tourism in Bocas del Toro.

The formation of a Geotourism Stewardship Council 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 to tourism development as it has the potential to enhance the tourism product 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.

The first step in formally establishing the DMO for Bocas del Toro was to obtain letters of commitment from local stakeholders agreeing to serve as a member of the Geotourism Stewardship Council. Membership information packets were circulated to potential members and ten leaders—representing local businesses, indigenous community-based tourism groups, artisans, farmers, transportation providers, and NGO's—agreed to serve on the Geotourism Stewardship Council based upon their commitment to the sustainable development and conservation of Bocas del Toro.

All members of the Geotourism Stewardship Council (pictured right) officially convened on March 16, 2009 for the first official board meeting. On March 17, the Bocas del Toro Geotourism initiative was officially launched through a workshop attended by over 50 members of the local community. During this workshop, the overall objectives and activities of the project were introduced to the tourism stakeholders, local government and USAID officials.



On April 20, 2009, a meeting was convened with the Geotourism Stewardship Council to discuss the results of an online survey (taken by 15 members) administered to gather opinions on aspects such as the name, the members of the Board, the mission of the organization, key issues in the destination, and what tools and techniques the organization should use. The group reached a consensus on the name of the organization (the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance or “BSTA”) and also agreed with the recommendations to create a new organization as most members felt that those in existence were not serving the same mission and objectives as the proposed DMO.

The Geotourism Stewardship council now serves as the DMO’s board of directors and makes decisions on behalf of the general membership. This Council ensures the BSTA is used to address conservation and tourism growth issues in the region. This small group of destination stewards essentially "own" this initiative, governs activities, and will ensure sustainability of the destination management organization upon the end of the USAID-CCAW program.

One of the main objectives of the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance has continued to be the implementation of projects to enhance the sustainability of the destination. Aside from the actual “alliance”, spontaneous relationships between various stakeholders rapidly formed as people began to realize how strong their collective efforts can be when working towards common objectives. Momentum has grown throughout the project as local stakeholders (many who had never worked together before) joined to form the following action committees dedicated to addressing a variety of issues at the destination level:

#### ***Waste Management Committee***

The waste management committee was formed to address one of the largest threats facing the viability of sustainable tourism development in Bocas del Toro—unregulated garbage dumping along the shoreline due to limited options for convenient and proper waste disposal on the island. The waste management committee aims to educate the general public of Bocas del Toro on waste management issues; develop composting, recycling, and other waste collection programs that divert trash from the “dump”, and create a coalition of community members to combat waste management issues in Bocas del Toro and encourage more sustainable practices.

Since this action committee was created, local stakeholders have worked collectively on the following three projects:

- An awareness and education campaign, including the creation of a public service announcement (PSA) to educate the public of Bocas on the local waste management issues, the impacts of waste mismanagement on the population's health and the archipelago's natural resources, and what local residents can do individually to contribute to trash reduction. Visit the following link to view the PSA: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3sE9Zq22yA>  
Members of the waste management committee were also interviewed on the evening news of the local cable TV station (Cable Chico).
- Collection of plastic shopping bags, plastic bottles, and aluminum cans outside of the tourism information center for recycling; and
- Selling reusable shopping bags in markets and in the tourism information center (see more information below).



**Promotional Posters created to create awareness and participation in the BSTA Waste Management Committee**

Plastic is one of the main components of solid waste found contaminating the waterways around Bocas del Toro. It is not only unsightly, but also interferes with natural processes. For example, the sea turtles that nest around Bocas del Toro mistake plastic bags for jellyfish and ingest them, which often leads to death. This situation has also been documented in sea mammals and birds. For this reason, the BSTA waste management committee collects used plastic bags (such as the ones given out in supermarkets) so that 30

women from the local community of San San Pond Sak in mainland Bocas del Toro can weave them into beautiful hand knitted purses and bags.

Each one of these purses uses between 60-80 plastic bags, which would otherwise be discarded as waste, and involves at least 30 hours of dedicated work. They are washable and 100% ecologically friendly. These bags retail for \$40 in the tourism information center and represent an important source of revenue for both the BSTA and the local community of San San Pond Sak. This initiative is supported by the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Network (WIDECAST), and implemented by AAMVECONA—the friends and neighbors of the coast of nature, which is an NGO based near Changuinola.

### ***Farmer's Market Committee***

The Farmer's Market committee under the BSTA has organized a bi-weekly farmers market to bring the local community together to sell produce, prepared foods, crafts, and showcase local music and traditional dancing. The first farmers market was successfully held on Saturday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, organized by the BSTA alongside the local municipality. The Director of Tourism and Environment (part of the Mayor's office in Bocas del Toro) allowed BSTA to use a local park free of charge for four months to hold this market. He is also providing some equipment to support the event (such as tables, stands, etc.). The market will be held bi-weekly on the first and third Saturday of each month from 12-5pm. If the event is successful, the Farmer's Market committee hopes to make this a weekly occurrence.

The farmer's market has been promoted in the local newspaper—the Bocas Breeze—as well as through BSTA members and the tourism information center.



***The bi-weekly Farmer's Market held in the town park on the 1st and 3rd Saturday of each month***

## **1.2. Develop and implement a business model for the destination management organization**

In February 2009, a business plan document was developed for the DMO concept with a complete set of financial projections. This document indicated that not only was a DMO feasible, but critical to boosting the level of effort dedicated to destination management and marketing in the archipelago. This document has served as a “road map” to creating this entity and enabled project implementers to articulate plans and action steps needed to establish this organization.

The mission statement of the BSTA is: *“to support sustainable tourism development, promote responsible travel that sustains and enhances the geographical character of the place—our environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of our residents while giving incentives for travelers to understand and protect the local culture and environment they are visiting.”*

Based on the research and analysis conducted during the business planning process, coupled with discussions with local stakeholders and existing tourism associations, a public-private hybrid was recommended as the optimal model for the DMO. This would allow the DMO to establish itself as a tour operator in order to facilitate bookings for BSTA members. The DMO would also need to submit the legal documentation needed to form an NGO in Bocas del Toro. Solimar worked with a Panama City based law firm to assist in the registration of the NGO, which was established as an affiliate organization of US-based Sustainable Travel International (STI).

Due to the somewhat prohibitive number of requirements necessary to establish the DMO as a Corporation Limited, a concession represented the most viable option for BSTA to operate as a for-profit company and achieve one of its primary goals—promoting and selling sustainable tourism tours in the region. A concession structure will also allow BSTA to generate a steady source of revenue through commissions collected on reservations made for BSTA members. The BSTA is in the process of identifying an existing legally registered tour operator to sign a concession agreement.

The public and private arms of BSTA will be governed by the same board of directors and maintain the mission to support local conservation projects through public-private partnerships and revenues generated by the organization.

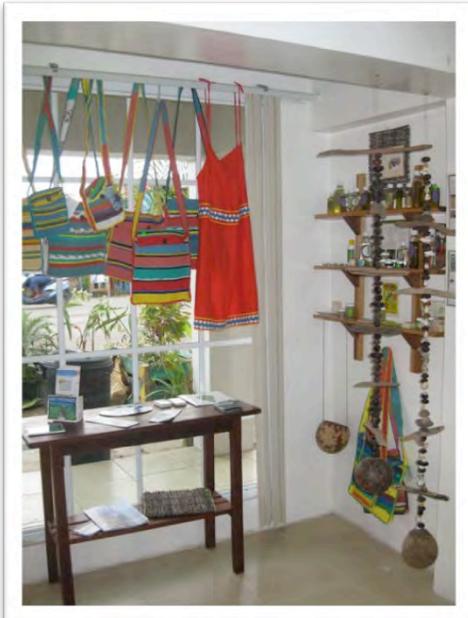
While generous funding from the USAID-CCAW program helped to cover initial start-up costs of the DMO, Solimar assisted BSTA to immediately begin implementing the following revenue generating services to help ensure its sustainability:

### ***Tourism Information Center***

One of the most visible and exciting outcomes of USAID-CCAW program is the opening of Bocas del Toro’s first tourism information center (located on the main street of Isla Colon), which is managed and operated by the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance. The Center provides a welcoming environment for travelers to congregate, use the Internet, purchase local handicrafts, learn about available tourism products and services through activity and

accommodation guides containing attractive sales sheets detailing each BSTA member and their products offered. A booking desk is also available staffed with a knowledgeable representative who can give information and directions, as well as assist with tour and hotel reservations for member businesses. Since its opening, the tourism information center has generated over \$1,400 in reservations for BSTA—evidencing the tremendous revenue generating potential that exists should the information center begin collecting commissions.

In addition to tourists, local residents often stop by with ideas for projects that could be implemented by the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance (such as beach clean ups and starting environmental education programs in schools). The tourism information center has clearly become the environmental focus of the community and word is spreading about the potential impacts of the Alliance to sustainable tourism in the region.



While the tourism information center currently generates only a small amount of revenue from the sale of merchandise, it is a critical asset to the BSTA. The Alliance will keep the information center open through defraying overhead costs (mainly rent and the salary to cover a full-time staff member) with income generated through membership fees, sponsorships and—eventually—commissions through the sale of BSTA member products.

### **Membership Fees**

A basic membership fee is currently charged to local businesses and community-based tourism organizations in order to receive the following benefits:

- Full page description on the consumer-focused Bocas del Toro Web site ([www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com](http://www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com)) developed through the USAID-CCAW program;
- Full page sales sheet made available to visitors inside the tourism information center;
- Right to distribute sales brochures of their tourism facilities at the TIC;
- Business linkages with local and international tour operators to promote sustainable tourism activities in the archipelago;
- Facilitate the bookings of hotels and activities within Bocas del Toro through the tourism information center;
- Special distinction as a tourism business supporting sustainable tourism initiatives in Bocas del Toro; and
- Opportunity to be featured in press and familiarization trips.

The fee structure varies depending on the size and type of organization:

<b>Business Type</b>	<b>Annual Fee</b>
Hotels (more than 20 rooms)	\$300
Hotels (1-20 rooms)	\$200
Restaurants	\$100
Tour Providers	\$200
Community-Based Tourism Organizations	\$50
Conservation NGOs	\$0

During BSTA’s few short months in operation, the following businesses and community-based tourism organizations have already joined as members, generating upwards of \$3,000 in revenue for the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance:

- Tranquilo Bay (small hotel)
- Lula’s Bed and Breakfast (small hotel)
- Casa Blanca (small hotel)
- La Loma Jungle Lodge (small hotel)
- Casa Cayuco (small hotel)
- Popa Paradise (small hotel)
- Punta Caracol (small hotel)
- Hotel Bocas del Toro (small hotel)
- La Coralina (small hotel)
- Al Natural (small hotel)
- Starfish Coffee (restaurant)
- BiBi’s Restaurant (restaurant)
- Mesi Jablado (community)
- Soposo (community)
- Butterfly Garden (tour operator)
- Boteros Unidos (tour operator)
- Dolphin Bay Preserve (community)
- Rainforest Awakenings (tour operator)
- Up in the Hill (restaurant)

## **Sponsorships**

Through the help of the USAID-CCAW program, the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance secured the sponsorship of Nature Air (NA), the world's first carbon neutral airline. In November 2009, BSTA and Nature Air signed a memorandum of understanding to collaboratively develop and promote sustainable tourism in the province of Bocas del Toro in the following manner:

### **Roles and Responsibilities of BSTA**

- BSTA will work toward its mission using projects and the Geotourism Stewardship Council to focus on sustainability education for both tourists and local businesses alike;
- BSTA will provide NA with branding about the tourism information center (Nature Air logo featured on the outside and inside of the building);
- BSTA will provide NA direct access to BSTA members (through one-on-one meetings, seminars, and email) to help NA communicate with local tourism suppliers about the benefits of working with NA;
- NA may have one representative on the BSTA Geotourism Stewardship Council and attend regular meetings;
- NA logo will appear on BSTA promotional materials, BSTA website and regular BSTA newsletters;
- NA to have access to the list of tour operators in Costa Rica, Panama, North America, and Europe to whom BSTA provides information as well as with whom the members of BSTA do business; and
- NA may use the BSTA logo in its promotional efforts.

### **Responsibilities and Benefits of Nature Air**

- \$3,000 payment to initiate sponsorship benefits;
- NA will assist BSTA in working towards its mission using projects and the Geotourism Stewardship Council to focus on sustainability education for both tourists and local businesses alike;
- NA will provide BSTA with branding materials for BSTA to place about the tourism information center;
- NA will have its representative attend BSTA's Geotourism Stewardship Council meetings; and
- NA will provide BSTA with its logo for BSTA to use on its promotional materials, BSTA website and regular BSTA newsletters.

### **1.3. Develop and implement a comprehensive international marketing and branding strategy**

The newly established destination management organization is best positioned to effectively market Bocas del Toro and ensure its competitiveness as a sustainable tourism destination. A Marketing and Branding Strategic Plan was developed to provide a comprehensive roadmap for BSTA to stimulate increased sustainable tourism expenditures in the Bocas del Toro region. The plan identified the target traveler market and the specific demands for the authentic sustainable tourism products that are available in Bocas. The Plan articulated a viable and cost-effective plan to reach out to, and then successfully engage prospective customers, enticing them to book tourism products and services in Bocas del Toro. Marketing activities implemented during the life of the program included:

#### ***Logo Development and Design***

Full-color logos used to brand both the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance (BSTA) and the destination of Bocas del Toro were developed through an extensive process involving inputs from the BSTA Stewardship Council as well as the greater Bocas community. The two logos feature key colors, elements, and overall themes, which were recommended by local stakeholders as conveying a strong feel for the region. The destination logo is used on consumer focused marketing collateral to highlight the region, while the BSTA logo is used among the tourism industry members in order to show membership in the alliance and support of sustainable tourism initiatives.

The process for developing the logos and tagline began with a workshop in March 2009 where stakeholders participated in a “branding visioning exercise”. This was followed by surveys conducted via email and in person among local stakeholders in May 2009. This ensured that inputs from a wide variety of people were considered prior to developing the logo concepts.



*BSTA Logo*



*Bocas del Toro Destination Logo*

#### ***Web site***

The centerpiece of the promotional strategy is the comprehensive consumer-focused travel Web site ([www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com](http://www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com)). This site provides comprehensive information and photographs on BSTA members as well as other useful information (such as travel logistics, major attractions, safety, etc.) about the destination that travelers need while planning a vacation.



*Bocas del Toro consumer-focused Web site homepage*



*Postcard Front*



*Postcard Back*

### **Promotional Postcards**

A collection of highly colorful and attractive promotional postcards (see above, right) were designed to take the place of a traditional marketing brochure. The postcards feature a full-color front of an iconic image portraying Bocas del Toro and a back with information about the BSTA as well as a map to direct travelers to the Geotourism Information Center. The marketing collateral was chosen as it is lower cost to reproduce and distribute than traditional tri-fold brochures. 1,000 post cards were printed on cardstock which helped retain the shape and integrity of the card, as opposed to paper brochures that succumb to the humidity and heat of Panama, often bending over and becoming curled in brochure racks. The postcards were disseminated throughout Panama (through BSTA members) and Costa Rica (through the visitor information center in Puerto Viejo) to attract consumers to visit the Geotourism Information Center or Bocas del Toro’s new destination Web site.

### **Accommodations and Activities Guides**

Attractive Sales Sheets for products offered by BSTA members (including hotels, day tours, restaurants, etc.) and tour packages were designed, laminated and placed into a binder enclosed by a locally crafted cover to showcase indigenous handcrafts of Bocas del Toro. These sales guides are available for travelers to browse through while relaxing inside the Tourism Information Center. Travelers may make reservations through the agent working at the TIC or directly with the BSTA member.

#### **1.4. Development of Sustainable Tourism Packages that create direct linkages between various groups within the DMO**

Tourism packaging facilitates the booking and purchase of products and services from multiple providers. Packaging also conducts destination and logistical research on behalf of travelers—making it easier and more likely for them to book a vacation. In addition, tourism packaging combines the various elements that make a destination unique, such as community and biodiversity, and allows for targeted marketing opportunities. Tours currently offered in Bocas del Toro all focus on the same attractions and are little more than boat transportation to get to a overcrowded beach or snorkeling location.

The forests of Bocas are still home to indigenous peoples trying to hold on to their cultural and ancestral lands. This includes the little known Naso, who welcome visitors to their communities up the Rio Teribe. The islands and lowlands also support a distinct group of indigenous people known as the Ngobe-Bugle. They still live by fishing and subsistence farming, travel mostly by canoes and reside in wooden, thatched-roof huts without electricity or running water. The abundance of rainforest covering Bocas del Toro also makes for great exploring and hiking opportunities. Upon recognizing the opportunity to offer more unique authentic experiences for travelers to Bocas, Solimar utilized the following strategies to create new tourism packages:

1) Involved the local population directly in identifying geotourism assets. A nomination process was developed and residents and visitors were invited to help tell the story of what places are important and unique to them. This nomination process included two different nomination process and forms:

- **“4 Perfect Days” Nomination Process:** Participants were asked to create a 4-day itinerary that incorporated both attractions and businesses featuring the local culture and natural assets of the destination. One day had to include plans for rain!
- **“Favorite Place” Nomination Process:** Participants were asked to nominate their favorite geotouristic sites in the area.

2) Worked with community-based tourism organizations to develop and market their tour packages and develop business linkages with other tourism operations.

A number of new packages were developed as a result of these strategies. The following four are currently being promoted through the Tourism Information Center.

- San Cristobal Medicinal Trail Hike
- Naso Rainforest Adventure (overnight)
- Bastimentos Island Beach and Jungle Hike (self-guided)
- Half-day sealife tour to Dolphin Bay

There is considerable potential for the further development of other cultural heritage products, which is currently being explored by the BSTA.

## **1.5. Expand the customer service capacity and service quality of various groups within the tourism cluster**

Tourism initiatives typically contain strong training components to help local populations acquire new skills and adapt to changing local economies and environmental best practices. Two training programs were delivered over the course of the USAID-CCAW program to build the capacity of DMO staff and improve the guiding interpretation capabilities of local boteros.

### ***DMO Customer Service Training***

A comprehensive customer service manual was developed to train current and future BSTA staff to become exceptional travel planners. The manual contains practical guidelines and procedures to help build customer loyalty and create long-lasting relationships, which are much-needed elements in turning a business opportunity into a truly profitable one. The two current employees of the tourism information center received in-person training sessions in early September, 2009. The sessions trained DMO staff to:

- Provide information to tourists on the environmental and cultural assets of Bocas del Toro as well as the tours and accommodations available in the archipelago;
- Facilitate the booking of lodgings and activities for tourists;
- Manage and update the DMO's web site portal with new BSTA members;
- Manage the order and sales of local products and branded merchandise;
- Promote the membership program among tourism stakeholders and ensure the collection of both membership fees and commissions (when applicable);
- Manage visitor surveys to collect market research.

The comprehensive customer service manual, which includes a variety of useful document templates, was left behind in the tourism information center and will be used in the training of future staff.

### ***Boteros Training***

Boats are a way of life in Bocas del Toro. Water taxis are necessary to get from one island to another and many of the best spots in the province require a boat ride of some length. Boat drivers—known as “boteros”—offer a number of tours to the most popular attractions in the archipelago. In reality, these ‘tours’ are really little more than boat transportation to get to a pretty spot. They all focus on the same main attractions and do not take advantage of the many other natural, cultural, and historical attractions that the Bocas del Toro's archipelago and mainland offer. With these tours, too much time is spent being transported in boats from one attraction to another—with little interpretation or time to experience the attraction. The BSTA is working to change this current situation through developing new packages, partnering with local marine conservation organizations, and offering training programs such as the one described below.

In October 2009, Solimar conducted a training program for members of the Boteros Unidos Bocatoreños. This association is comprised of 22 boatmen from across the province and

was the first professional boteros association (out of five in the region) to legally establish itself as a non-profit organization. This association is a member of the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance and the president is represented on the BSTA Board of Directors. This association has always been keen to improve their operations and, as a result, its members were invited to attend this training pilot program.

This two-day training program was organized in a manner that encouraged the active involvement and discussion from all participants to achieve the following objectives:

- Improve the quality of the boat transportation offered by the boteros;
- Provide boteros with guidelines on how to conduct a professional boat operation that aligns with conservation best practices;
- Help boteros develop a transportation service that differentiates them from very similar services offered throughout the island; and
- Renew the boat tours currently offered in order to create a unique experience for clients.

Five members of Boteros Bocatoreños Unidos and the organization's secretary attended the first day of training. Eight members of Boteros Bocatoreños Unidos, the organization's secretary, and one member of the Carenero Boatmen's Cooperative attended the second day of training.

The training served to facilitate discussion among the boteros about how to expand their current product offerings, improve their sustainability (especially when taking visitors dolphin watching), enhance the tourists' experience, and generate more income. The boteros expressed an interest to begin diversifying their tours and implement sustainable tourism best practices through developing a workplan of immediate action steps. The boatmen will implement the following immediate actions over the next few months with the assistance of a dedicated volunteer from the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance:

- Begin offering a sunset dolphin watching tour to reduce the amount of boats that visit Dolphin Bay at one time. This will be a three-hour tour offered in the afternoon as opposed to only the full-day tour currently offered;
- Provide maps and information to enhance the visitors' experience while on a boat tour;
- Make trash bags available in the boats; and
- Develop a specialized snorkeling tour to diversify current product offerings.

## **1.6. Improve the environmental performance of private sector groups within the sustainable tourism cluster**

In December 2008, Solimar International contracted Rainforest Alliance to carry out concrete actions that would enable members of the private sector to implement sustainable tourism best practices. The overall objective of incorporating economic, social, cultural, environmental and quality aspects into the operative systems of the hotels was to significantly contribute to the positioning of Bocas del Toro as a sustainable tourism destination.

The workshops and technical assistance provided by Rainforest Alliance from April to September 2009 aimed at providing a strong foundation in best management practices to various tourism stakeholders in Bocas. The program specifically focused on 10 hotels through an evaluation of how sustainable or unsustainable their tourism operations were in 3 specific areas: economic, socio-cultural and environmental. The results of these evaluations served as a basis for the two-day technical assistance meeting in which various issues were studied in depth according to the improvement areas found in the evaluations.

A two-day training workshop on Best Management Practices in Sustainable Tourism took place on April 20-21, 2009 where 18 persons attended the workshop, among them hotel owners and tourism operations administrators. Twelve area hotels were represented.

Previous to the workshop a small survey on the knowledge of the participants in sustainability was sent in order to adapt the level of the workshop. This survey showed that most of the participants already had a good knowledge and awareness of sustainable practices so the contents and presentations of the workshop were adapted to this specific audience.

All workshop participants received a *Guide for Sustainable Tourism Best Practices* and a *Guide to Best Practices for Sustainable Tourism in Marine-Coastal Ecosystems*. This workshop dealt with sustainable tourism, certification and best management practices in environmental, socio-cultural and economic aspects of the hotel operation, through presentations and group exercises.

Rainforest Alliance consultants verified ten hotels within the archipelago between the end of April and beginning of June 2009. The consultants met personally with each hotel owner and administrator to explain the process of the verification and interview them about various aspects of the hotel operation. At the end of the verification, they met again to talk about the first findings of the verification.

To date, nine hotels have signed a memorandum of understanding, demonstrating a commitment to implement a best management practices plan to improve their sustainability performance. The MOU of Hotel Eclipse de Mar has not yet been signed due to an inability of Rainforest Alliance to reach the Hotel's General Manager. Rainforest Alliance expects to receive the signed MOU in November 2009 when conditions permit.

## **1.7. Create a bi-national sustainable tourism alliance and marketing materials to promote the La Amistad International Peace Park**

La Amistad International Park (Parque Internacional La Amistad Costa Rica-Panama) represents the first bi-national biosphere reserve in the world. The park area is equally split between Costa Rica and Panama, covering portions of Chiriqui as well as parts of the Bocas del Toro mainland. It covers 401,000 hectares of tropical forest and is the largest nature reserve in Central America—home to over 20% of the region’s biodiversity. With such a diverse range of environments and cultures, visitors to this UNESCO World Heritage site can experience a wide variety of flora, fauna, and indigenous communities. Despite its wealth of tourism offerings, the Park currently receives few visitors due to its remote location and lack of promotion.

The cross-frontier position of La Amistad International Park presents unique collaborative opportunities for the destinations of Bocas del Toro, Panama and Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica—which serve as gateways to the Park. Through the support of the USAID-CCAW program, Solimar International facilitated the establishment of a bi-national strategic alliance—branded *La Ruta Amistad*—between the destinations of Puerto Viejo and Bocas del Toro. Through this alliance, the two major anchor destinations of La Amistad International Park have committed to work together to raise awareness of the tourism offerings that exist along this trans-boundary route with the goal of capturing more visitors en route to either destination.

The ultimate goal of fostering sustainable tourism development in this region is to encourage the conservation of The Cahuita-La Amistad-Río Cañas-Bocas del Toro watershed (Costa Rica and Panama) through linking its protection among local residents to an income generating activity. This goal of developing and promoting sustainable tourism is shared by the two organizations that currently comprise the alliance—the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance (BSTA) and the Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation (ATEC).

The **Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation (ATEC)** is Puerto Viejo’s original eco-tourism provider. They work to help visitors find ecologically and socially responsible activities within the Talamanca region of Costa Rica. Founded in 1989, ATEC funded the training of a group of about 20 guides. From their website and small office in Puerto Viejo they now represent over 100 fabulous local guides. ATEC currently has an office and information center located in the middle of Puerto Viejo that arranges eco- and community-based tours. They stimulate conservation through education and by helping local associations and families derive economic benefits from their natural resources.

From July through September 2009 the bi-national alliance was established and began to collaborate through the following activities:

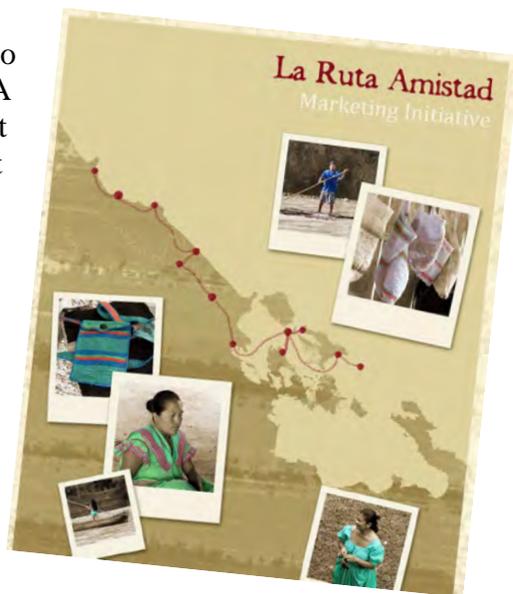
### ***Exchange Tour***

On September 22-24, 2009, an exchange tour took place between ATEC and BSTA. Several board members, business members, and staff members of the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance travelled to Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica to experience community-based

tourism products that have been established by ATEC and learn more about other conservation initiatives that ATEC is managing. This exchanged tour served to help the newly established BSTA learn more about sustainable tourism initiatives that have been successfully operating in the Talamanca region for over 20 years. During their visit, BSTA also developed strategic partnerships with community tourism products in and around Puerto Viejo to be promoted through marketing efforts of BSTA.

### ***Co-Branded Promotional Passport***

Given the continuous flow of tourists between the two destinations, the USAID-CCA W program helped BSTA and ATEC recognize the collaborative opportunity that exists to promote the La Amistad region. As its first joint initiative, BSTA and ATEC collaborated to create a co-branded promotional passport to increase awareness of La Amistad International Peace Park (including biodiversity, indigenous groups, history, economy, etc.), highlight the tourism products available within the route to and from Bocas del Toro and Puerto Viejo, and provide useful travel tips for tourists when travelling in the region.



3,000 promotional passports were printed on 100% post-consumer waste recycled paper by Print.net, Incorporated—a US-based printing company offering eco-friendly printing services. The promotional passports will be distributed to travelers through the information centers of both the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance and the Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation, through both organizations' member businesses, as well as through strategic distribution points (such as border crossings, etc.) within the region. Information about La Ruta Amistad along with passports available to download will also be included on BSTA and ATEC's web sites.

## 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 Bocas del Toro, Panama:

- Brought a strong and diverse group of stakeholders together to establish a destination management organization with the goal of working collaboratively to ensure a more sustainable future for Bocas del Toro. The BSTA is now viewed as the focal point for addressing environmental issues in the community;
- Developed an additional number of public-private partnerships willing to work together to change the image of their destination and work towards collective solutions to issues through the formation of action committees;
- Introduced tourism stakeholders to the concept of geotourism and the importance of promoting the unique cultural and natural assets available only in Bocas del Toro;
- Facilitated the creation of a waste management committee that established a local awareness campaign and recycling program;
- Facilitated the creation of a farmer's market committee that established a bi-weekly farmer's market to sell local produce and showcase traditional music and dancing;
- Opened Bocas del Toro's first visitor information center to educate visitors about the cultural and natural assets available in Bocas del Toro. The information center has also served as a local hub and meeting place where residents can express their ideas for conservation projects;
- Recruited 19 members to join the BSTA which generated business content for the web site and sales manuals (available in the tourism information center) and generated over \$3,000 in membership fees to support BSTA objectives;
- Secured a sponsorship from Nature Air, generating an additional \$3,000 in sponsorship revenues;
- Developed a number of marketing and collateral materials to promote Bocas del Toro as a sustainable tourism destination—including a web site, promotional postcards, and a sales manual featuring BSTA member products;
- Developed four new products that link local communities to the market and diversify the current offerings available in the archipelago;
- Generated \$1,400 in sales for BSTA members through reservations made through the tourism information center;
- Trained DMO staff in customer service skills;
- Trained local boteros to improve the quality and sustainability of their tours and facilitated a productive dialogue regarding improvements that can be made;
- Trained 18 persons in Rainforest Alliance's Best Management Practices;
- Obtained the commitment of 10 local hotels to implement Rainforest Alliance's Best Management Practices;

- Established a bi-national sustainable tourism alliance between two organizations (BSTA and ATEC) with similar goals to facilitate knowledge sharing and the cross-promotion of their respective destinations; and
- Developed and printed 3,000 promotional passports to market La Ruta Amistad between Bocas del Toro and Puerto Viejo.

## SECTION 3. LESSONS LEARNED

**Sustainability and Local Ownership:** Obtaining initial support and trust from local stakeholders was critical to achieving destination stewardship. The USAID-CCAW program has worked to ensure the sustainability of the initiative, particularly through the formation of strategic action committees and the designation of leadership roles and responsibilities to the local geotourism stewardship council members. In the end, however, the sustainability of the initiative is up to the members of the Alliance. By identifying strong leaders at the beginning of the program, we are confident that the BSTA will continue operating for many years to come.

**Facilitating vs. Prescribing:** To empower local stakeholders at the destination level, it was 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 local farmers market committee organized a bi-weekly farmers market alongside the local municipality to bring the local community together to sell produce, prepared foods, crafts, and showcase local music and traditional dancing. 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 inherently care about destination stewardship. To involve as many stakeholders 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. Once businesses were part of BSTA, it was easier to obtain their commitment and participation to work on various local action committees.

**Communication:** Effective communication efforts throughout the project strongly contributed to its successful outcome. From individual consultations, the first meeting with the Geotourism Stewardship Councils and the local community, to regular updates through emails, newsletters, and the BSTA web site—the USAID-CCAW program ensured that all local stakeholders were aware of the program’s objectives, its outcomes, and were continuously encouraged to join its efforts.

**Establishing Alliances:** The alliance formed between BSTA and ATEC was extremely helpful for the leadership and management of BSTA to see what is possible for their organization and was able to learn by example from ATEC’s twenty years of experience.

**Timeline of Activities:** Certain activities and steps should have been initiated earlier in the program to allow for adequate implementation time and follow-up. Upon implementing future DMO initiatives, the following should be explored early in the program:

- Legal registration process;
- More emphasis should be placed on holding training programs at the beginning of the project to be sure there is adequate follow-up on the implementation of best practices taught during the program; and
- Certain steps should have been taken **before** starting to recruit members, such as the launch of the website so they could see the tangible benefits of membership prior to signing up.

**Mis-Branding:** The name "Tourist Information Center" is inconsistent with the mission of the BSTA. In order to give visitors the information they are looking for upon visiting the center, staff members are often forced to promote non-members (such as hostels or dive schools—none of which are currently members) or unsustainable businesses. People visit the Center wanting to purchase maps or obtain directions—which is the usual role of a tourist information center. The focus on sustainable tourism therefore is not as clear, which could have been avoided if the center was branded differently (as the BSTA's office or store) in order to make its purpose clearer.