

# USAID CONSERVATION OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WATERSHEDS PROGRAM

**DELIVERABLE NO 9:  
BI-NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ALLIANCE REPORT  
SUBCONTRACT #EP-I-04-03-00014-03**

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BI-NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ALLIANCE REPORT**

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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 Bribri Women of Talamanca
ANAM	Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente
ARAP	Panama's Aquatic Resources Authority
ATEC	Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation
ATP	Panamanian Tourism Authority
BSTA	Bocas del Toro Sustainable Tourism Alliance
CBTO	Community Based Tourism Organization
CCAW	Conservation of Central American Watersheds Program
CBTC	Corredor Biológico Talamanca-Caribe
DMC	Destination Management Company
DMO	Destination Management Organization
NGS	National Geographic Society
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
SMME	Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises
TIC	Tourist Information Center
WIDECAST	Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network

## CONTEXT

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. As a result of the exchange process described in this report, 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 now have the opportunity to learn from each other and work together to raise awareness of all the tourism offerings that exist along this trans-boundary route with the goal of capturing more visitors en route to either destination.

In recent years, Puerto Viejo and Bocas del Toro have become popular destinations for travelers visiting both Costa Rica and Panama. Due to their geographical proximity, many inbound tour operators and independent travelers include both destinations as part of multi-destination holidays. While this relationship exists among the demand side of the tourism market, the two destinations have not yet worked collaboratively to date. Upon recognizing this connection and the opportunities that exist, Solimar International facilitated the creation of a bi-national sustainable tourism alliance with the following objectives:

- Establish relationships between key stakeholders in Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica and Bocas del Toro, Panama;
- Promote knowledge sharing and change in both destinations by showcasing examples of successful sustainable tourism initiatives and learning from those that have not been successful;
- Highlight the need for increased promotion and sales of community-based tourism initiatives in and around the route between the two destinations; and
- Develop and distribute a promotional tool to increase the number of visitors to both regions as well as showcase the many community-based products that exist along the route between the two destinations.

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 **Bocas del Toro Sustainable Tourism Alliance (BSTA)** is a destination management organization composed of Bocas del Toro’s many tourism-based enterprises. It was established through the support of the USAID Conservation of Central American Watersheds Program to promote sustainable tourism products and educate travelers on the natural and cultural resources available in the province and how to travel responsibly. The Alliance supports the local and global marketing efforts of its members and promotes Bocas del Toro as a sustainable tourism destination through a tourism information center in Isla Colon and a consumer-focused web site ([www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com](http://www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com)). Additionally, the Alliance undertakes conservation efforts through local action committees to preserve the cultural and ecological landscape of the province.

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.

In July of 2009, members of the Solimar International team travelled to Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica to establish contact with leaders from the Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation (ATEC), ascertain their interest in forming a bi-national alliance with BSTA, and discuss the following initiatives:

- 1) Organizing an exchange tour to Puerto Viejo with the participation of representatives from ATEC and BSTA.*

An exchange tour was presented to ATEC as a way 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 would also be developing strategic partnerships with community tourism products in and around Puerto Viejo to be promoted through the marketing efforts of the BSTA.

- 2) The creation of a co-branded promotional passport to increase awareness of La Amistad International Park and the community-based attractions along La Ruta Amistad between Puerto Viejo and Bocas del Toro.*

Given the continuous flow of tourists between the two destinations, the opportunity was also presented for BSTA and ATEC to collectively promote the La Amistad region. As its first joint initiative, through the support of the USAID-CCAW program, BSTA and ATEC will 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. 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.

## SECTION 1. EXCHANGE TRIP TO PUERTO VIEJO, COSTA RICA

An exchange trip took place on September 22-24, 2009 with several board members, business members, and staff members of the Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance. They 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 (such as a bio-fuel cooperative and a recycling program). This exchange trip allowed BSTA to learn from ATEC's challenges and be inspired by their successes. It also helped form cohesion among BSTA members and instill a sense of ownership in the future success of their organization.

### 1.1 List of Participants

The following people participated in the first exchange trip between BSTA and ATEC:

#### ***Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance***

NAME	ORGANIZATION	BSTA POSITION
Luis Mo	Hotel del Parque/ Butterfly Garden	Vice President
Arnaldo Napoleon	Boteros Unidos Bocaterenos President	Treasurer
Esperanza Pineda	Mesi Jablado	Secretary
Matilda Grand	Starfish Coffee/ Cacao Broker	Member
Piper Frode	Peace Corp Volunteer	Member
Cathleen Monahan	BSTA Tourism Information Center	Staff

#### ***Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation***

NAME	ORGANIZATION	ATEC POSITION
Alaine Berg	ATEC	Director
Susana Schik	ATEC	Founder
Giovanni Quesada	WIDECAST	Program Manager
Claudio Quesada	WIDECAST	Director
Danilo Layan Gubb	DITSOWOU LODGE	Partner
Rodolfo Goodman Grenald	Talamancan Dolphin Foundation	Partner
Willis Rankin	ATEC	Founder/Guide
Sarah Arraya	Al Corredor Biologico, Hone Creek	Partner
Karla Murillo	Al Corredor Biologico, Hone Creek	Partner
Edwin Patterson	ATEC, Coopetalamanca (biofuel co-op)	President
Omar	Guia Manz	Guide
Bacalao	Capitan Manz	Guide

## 1.2 Detailed Itinerary (September 22-24, 2009)

### ***Tuesday, September 22***

7:00am	Depart Bocas del Toro for Puerto Viejo
11:30am-6:00pm	Chocolate Tour, Upper Talamanca
7:30pm	Group dinner with all BSTA participants

### ***Wednesday, September 23***

7:30am	Departure from Puerto Viejo
8:00am	Visit of Iguana Conservation Farm on the Kekoldi Reserve
9:00am	Meeting with Biological Corridor Association
11:00am	Meeting with WIDECAST
11:30am	Visit to the RECICARIBE recycling center
1:00pm	Meeting with ATEC founding members
3:00pm	Departure for Manzanillo
4:00pm	Meeting with Dolphin foundation
5:30-7:00pm	Meeting with a group of tourism stakeholders from Manzanillo
9:00pm	Debriefing dinner

### ***Thursday, September 24***

8:00am	Meeting at ATEC office to discuss day-to-day operations
10:00 am	Departure from Puerto Viejo to Bocas del Toro

## 1.3 Summary of Activities in Detailed Itinerary

### **Chocolate Tour - Upper Talamanca**



Located in the heart of the Talamanca Reserve, the residents of the small town of Shiroles comprise one of Costa Rica's largest indigenous communities. BSTA visited the association of Indigenous Bribrí Women of Talamanca (ACOMUITA) to experience their tourism product involving a tour through their organic chocolate farm and the opportunity to participate in the process of chocolate production. During the tour, BSTA members learned more about the process of producing chocolate from the tree on the farm, to the drying in the sun, the work in the kitchen, and sampling of the final product. Receiving

tourists has allowed this women's cooperative to finance the production of their chocolate—the sale of which generates income for poor rural families.

While it was interesting to learn more about the women's cooperative and meet one of the leaders, BSTA participants felt the chocolate tour lacked quality customer service as well as qualitative information on the history of cacao farming and the importance of cacao to indigenous people. The cooperative currently does not receive a large number of tourists. If visitation were to increase, it is recommended that ATEC help develop the capacity of this women's cooperative through targeted training programs.

Although cacao cooperatives and privately run farms exist in Bocas del Toro, tours with a theme around chocolate have not yet been developed in the region. There is an opportunity to offer chocolate-themed experiences in the region and highlight the medicinal importance that the Ngobe indigenous community places on chocolate. The objective of visiting ACOMUITA was to learn more about this women's cooperative, the tourism product they have established, and evaluate whether a similar product could be replicated in Bocas del Toro.

The following members of the BSTA participated in the tour and are further exploring the establishment of a chocolate-themed tour for Bocas del Toro that could be promoted and made available through BSTA's tourism information center:

- Esperanza Pineda, indigenous women leader of Mesi Jablado
- Matilde Grand, Cacao Broker
- Piper Frode, Peace Corps Volunteer supporting the tourism development of San Cristobal

### **Kekoldi Indigenous Reserve – Tour of Iguana Farm**



Stakeholders in Bastimentos, Bocas del Toro have considered creating an iguana farm and preservation program as an attraction for tourists, but it has not yet materialized. The objective of visiting the Kekoldi Reserve and participating on the iguana conservation farm tour was to learn about how the iguana farm is operated and evaluate whether similar initiative could be developed in Bocas del Toro.

The Kekoldi indigenous reserve is located 15 minutes from Puerto Viejo and is home to the Iguana Conservation Farm, an iguana reproduction initiative that began in 1990. Thanks to a grant received from the Netherlands, the Bribri community hired a biologist and began an iguana reproduction initiative. Since its inception, the farm has released more than 35,000 iguanas into the Kekoldi indigenous reserve.

The visit lasted less than an hour and discussions were held concerning the initial grant received by the Bribri community and the living conditions of the iguanas. Generally speaking, BSTA participants questioned whether tourists would be interested in this type of activity and did not feel it was a good fit for Bocas del Toro.

### **Meeting with WIDECAST**

The Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is an expert network of biologists, managers, community leaders, and educators working in more than 40 nations and territories to ensure the recovery and sustainable management of depleted sea turtle populations. WIDECAST has significant experience in Panama, having previously worked with AAMVECONA, a Panamanian NGO based in Changuinola, and with Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC) who share a mutual objective to preserve marine turtle populations in the Bocas del Toro province.

WIDECAST's technical assistance in Bocas del Toro has included training local women on weaving techniques to turn plastic bags into purses in order to reduce the amount of trash threatening the marine turtle population. These recycled plastic bags are currently sold in the BSTA Information Center and generate an important source of revenue for both the local community and the alliance. WIDECAST also regularly offers guide training programs in and around the region based upon its comprehensive Caribbean handbook for the turtle tourism industry. The objective of these training programs are to ensure that turtle-oriented tourism ventures do not adversely impact sea turtles, their populations, or their habitats and, at best, contribute to meeting both their conservation needs and those of local communities.

Bocas del Toro has a particularly rich sea turtle population with four species and several life stages represented. There is a lot of potential to develop tours that feature sea turtle viewing in the archipelago of Bocas del Toro. Although this type of tour was offered to tourists a few years ago, it is no longer possible to go on a marine turtle watching tours due to the high cost of transportation to reach the site and the uncontrolled management of Playa Buff. Several local stakeholders have been trying to create a Patronato comprised of several NGOs, municipalities and other national entities—such as the Panamanian Aquatic Resource Authority (ARAP), the National Environmental Authority (ANAM), and the Panamanian Tourism Authority (ATP)—to protect the marine turtles in Playa Bluff and offer marine sea turtle tours. To date this project has not yet materialized and this meeting served to revitalize this effort and discuss how they could collaborate with WIDECAST.

There are many opportunities for the BSTA to collaborate further with WIDECAST, especially in regards to guide training. If/when the Patronato of playa Bluff project is

established, BSTA recognized the opportunity to work with WIDECASST to organize a marine turtle guide training workshop in either Puerto Viejo or Bocas del Toro to properly train the local boteros on how to ensure these tours do not adversely impact the local sea turtle populations. WIDECASST is offering its next guide training in Puerto Viejo in November.

### **Meeting with Recicaribe**

The Recycling Association of the Caribbean, or Recicaribe, is a community-recycling project that processes recyclable waste in the southern Caribbean region of Costa Rica. The project began in 1998 to recollect recycling materials such as plastics, glass, metal, aluminum, and tetrabrik from more than 300 clients on the Coastal zone of Manzanillo-Cahuita.

Members of the BSTA Solid Waste Management Committee were very interested in visiting the Recicaribe installation in Puerto Viejo in order to learn more about the initiative, their operating procedures, and the challenges faced by Recicaribe to run the initiative. As of now, recycling programs in Bocas del Toro do not exist and are desperately needed to help combat the growing garbage program. BSTA is very interested in running a similar type of initiative in Bocas and learning from the experiences of Puerto Viejo.

Recicaribe has faced some management issues during its last year of operations as the price they are able to recoup for recycled materials has dropped dramatically. As a result, the activity has stopped for a number of months. For the past two months, ATEC has taken over this initiative and has assigned a staff of four people and a number of other volunteers to separate recyclable materials from waste and sell them to the companies interested. As a result of taking on this recycling operation, ATEC has incurred additional costs that they may be unable to sustain in the long-term if the price of recycled materials does not rise. While it would be challenging for BSTA to replicate similar initiative (due to a lack of resources), it may be possible with grant help from the municipality of Bocas del Toro or other national entities.

### **Meeting with ATEC Founding Members**

With more than 20 years of experience, ATEC is a self-sustaining non-profit association that promotes culturally and ecologically sound tourism and small-scale, locally owned and responsible businesses. ATEC works on stimulating conservation through education and promotion of tours/activities that support conservation in the region. With such similar objectives to BSTA, ATEC is a wealth of knowledge and experience and a model organization working to promote both tourism and conservation. A meeting was organized between representatives of BSTA and the following founding members of ATEC:

- **Alaine Berg** - ATEC Director
- **Edwin Patterson** - ATEC's president and is currently involved in the Biofuel cooperative.
- **Willis Rankin** – ATEC's Vice President, and also a guide in Tortuguero

- **Mauricio Salazar** – Guide, member of the board, and is currently in charge of Puerto Viejo's farmer's market.
- **Susana Schik** - Was involved with the original guide training program and currently coordinates a number of voluntourism projects
- **Mel Baker** - Ran both the ATEC office and micro-loan program for many years

The main discussion points of the meeting included:

### 1) **The co-branded promotional passport**

The “La Ruta Amistad” co-branded promotional passport and an outline of its proposed contents (developed by the Solimar team) was officially introduced to ATEC’s board of directors in order to gather feedback. Since this meeting, ATEC has contributed their feedback on which tours/activities they would like to see included within this co-branded material.

### 2) **ATEC’s experience with:**

- **Organizing a weekly farmer’s market**

ATEC has been organizing a farmer’s market every Saturday for over five years. With BSTA just beginning this activity (on a bi-weekly basis), ATEC was able to provide great feedback on some of their questions and concerns experienced to date (such as the prices charged to the participants, quality control, etc.)

- **Setting up a biofuel cooperative**

ATEC has established a biofuel cooperative to recycle materials (such as cooking oil) into biofuel. Members of BSTA are very interested in this initiative and are looking into replicating it in Bocas del Toro. In particular, they are exploring the possibility of filtering vegetable oils from restaurants to produce this fuel. As a result, members of the BSTA waste management committee are currently assessing how the restaurants are disposing of their oil. According to previous research, many restaurants dispose of their used cooking oils by giving them to several indigenous communities for their own consumption. BSTA is currently designing a survey and plans to meet with restaurants to assess practices and estimate the number of gallons that are disposed of each year.

- **Running a Recycling program**

BSTA was able to learn from ATEC’s management of the ReciCaribe recycling initiative and how something similar could be established for Bocas del Toro.

- **Managing a Tourism Information Center**

For more than 20 years, ATEC has operated its information center to facilitate the booking of cultural and ecological tours/activities for tourists while selling books, postcards, bags, handicrafts, and maps. ATEC also runs an Internet café for tourists. As BSTA’s information center is fairly new, a number of topics were discussed—such as day-to day operations, booking tours, revenue generating opportunities, reporting to the board of directors, etc.

### **Meeting with Talamanca Dolphin Foundation – Manzanillo, Costa Rica**

The Talamanca Dolphin Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to the wild dolphins and people of Atlantic/Caribbean coastal Talamanca, in Costa Rica. The mission of the organization is to increase awareness, understanding and protection of the dolphins of Talamanca's coastal region through research, education, protection, promotion of responsible eco-tourism, and community involvement.

Tours to the dolphin bay area of Bocas del Toro have become very popular and are offered by almost all tour operator companies in Bocas del Toro (mainly by the boatmen associations). However, the lack of regulation enforcement and training to improve the quality of the tours has resulted in a poor outcome in terms of customer experience. Many of the boatmen chase the dolphins at rapid speeds as opposed to shutting off their motors, waiting, and educating tourists on the dolphin population and the different species that can be found in the area.

The director of Talamanca Dolphin Foundation is familiar with the non-sustainable practices that are taking place on dolphin watching tours in Bocas del Toro. He is interested in sharing his experience to increase awareness among local boatmen associations and articulate the changes that need to be made to the way they are currently operating these tours. This workshop would teach boatmen about different dolphins species found in the area, sources of disturbance, the benefits of conservation, how to properly guide a dolphin watching tour, as well as share potential price points for this special interest tour. There is an opportunity for the different boatmen associations in Bocas del Toro to upgrade the quality of the tours, diversify their tour offerings through a stand alone dolphin-watching tour, while also raising the price for this experience. The price for a two-hour tour in Manzanillo is US\$35/person whereas in Bocas del Toro, dolphin watching is typically part of a full-day tour package that includes other activities and is sold for \$25/person.

BSTA was planning to host the Director in Bocas del Toro to teach this workshop in October, however this was postponed due to illness. If this workshop is held in the coming weeks, it will serve as a valuable reinforcement to the best practices trainings delivered to the Boteros through the USAID-CCAW program on October 26-27.

### **Meeting with tourism stakeholders from the Corredor Biológico Talamanca**

The Corredor Biológico Talamanca Caribe (CBTC) is a non-profit organization and was also a grantee of the USAID Conservation of Central American Watersheds Program. The Corredor Biológico de Talamanca Caribe is a pioneering initiative working to conserve the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. This corridor connects the International Park La Amistad with the coast, and includes the biological reserve Hitoy Cerere, the Wildlife Refuge of Gandoca Manzanillo (REGAMA) and Cahuita National Park. It also includes the indigenous territories of Talamanca Bribrí, Talamanca Cabecar, Talamanca Keköldi, and Taini as well as private lands. The Corredor Biológico has 16 years of experience and has implemented a variety of programs (listed below) that are of interest to the BSTA:

- Network to Guard Resources: The network to guard resources is a community network comprised of people dedicated to conserving biodiversity. This network is currently working on the monitoring of wildlife, environmental education, control and supervision of the utilization of the forest.
- Research: Current research is dedicated to the identification and characterization of some plants and tree species located within the CBTC. Information about wildlife, monitoring of felines, macro invertebrates and fish has been collected.
- Recovery of degraded areas: This subprogram recovers places lacking vegetation mainly in the areas of streams and water sources. It also tries to recover and enrich many abandoned fields, and introduce species valuable for the site and the owner.
- Environmental Education: The subprogram of Environmental Education is the transversal axis of all the programs of the association. For four consecutive years, it has trained teachers in Talamanca and the Valley of the Estrella. This has been conducted in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the Training Office of Limon of the Ministry of Education. Sixty schools, 120 teachers and approximately 13,000 students have participated in this environmental education program.

Members of BSTA were particularly inspired by the Environmental Education program and are currently evaluating the possibility of running similar programs in Bocas del Toro in collaboration with the Municipality of Bocas del Toro. The Bocas del Toro archipelago accounts for more than 12 schools spread out over six islands of the archipelago.

## **SECTION 2. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS IDENTIFIED**

### **Challenges**

In general, there were no major challenges identified in regards to establishing a bi-national sustainable tourism alliance. The two founding organizations, BSTA and ATEC, are both extremely dedicated to supporting and implementing sustainable tourism initiatives in their respective destinations and are eager to collaborate when possible. The bi-national alliance has already provided knowledge sharing opportunities through an exchange trip and has created a co-branded promotional product. The main challenge facing this continuation of this alliance is the availability of funding, which should be addressed strategically by both organizations if this is something they would like to continue.

Other major challenges identified and discussed below are related to the flow of visitors between the two destinations, most of which can only be solved through changes in local and national policies.

#### ***Confusing immigration procedures at the Sixiaola/Guabito border***

The lack of clarity on what is required of tourists to enter and depart the Panamanian and Costa Rica borders is an obstacle to maximizing visitor flow between the two destinations. For example, visitors are obligated to purchase a bus ticket from the border to San Jose or Panama City although their final destination might be Puerto Viejo or Bocas del Toro. This requirement should be reviewed to facilitate ease of visitation to the smaller destinations in both countries.

Both organizations can play a key role in advocating for better immigration procedures to national authorities. The construction of a visitor information center at the Sixiaola-Guabito border would allow better control over tourists entering the country, a more welcoming atmosphere, clarity on the immigration rules for crossing from one country to the other, promotion of the two destinations, and information on available attractions in the region and beyond. The promotional passport will also serve to provide this information to travelers and should be distributed at the border.

#### ***Lack of transportation options***

Although the two destinations are close in proximity, accessing either Puerto Viejo or Bocas del Toro takes approximately four hours by land. Visitors must take a boat to Changuinola (half an hour), then a bus or a taxi to the border Sixiaola-Guabito (one hour), pass through the immigration check point in Panama, walk five minutes over the bridge from Panama to Costa Rica, pass through immigration control in Costa Rica and then take bus or taxi to finally reach Puerto Viejo (one hour).

Travelling between the two destinations takes approximately two hours by boat, however this is not permitted due to current immigration policies of both countries. If BSTA and ATEC could advocate for the harmonization of immigration procedures, more transportation options could be offered to help facilitate the flow of more visitors.

## **Opportunities and Strategic Recommendations**

A number of opportunities identified for the bi-national strategic alliance are discussed below along with a number of strategic recommendations that should be implemented to strengthen and ensure the sustainability of the alliance.

### **1) MARKETING AND PROMOTION**

As discussed previously, the cross-frontier position of La Amistad International Park presents unique marketing opportunities for the gateway destinations of Bocas del Toro, Panama and Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica. Many travelers visiting this region already include both destinations in their itineraries and there are many ways for the bi-national alliance to capitalize on this opportunity.

#### ***Strategic Recommendations***

- BSTA and ATEC should respectively promote each other's products and services to visitors through their web sites and through the distribution of promotional fliers in each other's information centers. For example, ATEC could provide travelers with a promotional postcard and answer questions about BSTA's services while in Puerto Viejo. This could help persuade some travelers to include Bocas del Toro in their itineraries or, if they are already planning to visit, encourage them to visit the information center upon their arrival. The same cross-promotion can be done through the BSTA information center to educate travelers about what is available in and around Puerto Viejo while promoting the products and services of ATEC. This type of marketing is ideal for these two destinations, as many of their visitors are backpackers with flexible itineraries looking for good suggestions on places to include in their travels.
- BSTA and ATEC should also develop itineraries, packages, and tours that incorporate both destinations and the products found along the route in between. ATEC currently receives many student groups throughout the year to participate in rainforest educational programs that could also be combined with other volunteer or educational programs in Bocas del Toro, Panama.
- Many Panamanian and Costa Rican tour operators already offer tourism packages to both Puerto Viejo and Bocas del Toro. BSTA and ATEC could jointly promote their members through the creation of a joint sales catalog that would facilitate linkages with these larger national tour operators offering multi-country itineraries.
- The bi-national alliance between BSTA and ATEC should serve as the official information resource for the Amistad region to facilitate increased visitation. While the development and distribution of 1,000 copies of La Ruta Amistad promotional passport was made possible through the support of the USAID-CCAW program, the bi-national alliance should identify additional sources of funding to ensure its sustainability and design other promotional materials (such as brochures and maps) and participation in tourism fairs and trade shows. Both organizations could look internally for funding or develop proposals to secure additional sources of funding from conservation or development programs, their respective tourism authorities, or other national organizations such as the Environmental National Authority.

- It is also recommended that both organizations dedicate a section of their web sites to promoting La Ruta Amistad. This section should provide information on how to travel between Costa Rica and Panama and what to expect along with descriptions of the tourism products available along that route and information on how to book these activities through either ATEC or BSTA.

## **2) KNOWLEDGE SHARING**

With such similar missions and activities taking place on the ground, BSTA and ATEC have the opportunity to continue sharing knowledge which will allow them to achieve greater impacts.

### ***Strategic Recommendations***

- BSTA and ATEC should include each other's board members and business members on their distribution list for major communications (such as newsletters, press releases, etc.). This will allow both organizations to stay informed of each other's current initiatives that can be utilized during their cross-destination promotional efforts.
- Annual exchange trips should also be planned to allow both existing and new members of both organizations to continue to learn from each other.
- A liason should be appointed to ensure this cross-organization communication is maintained.

## **3) STRENGTHEN TOURISM OFFERINGS ALONG LA RUTA AMISTAD**

The opportunity exists to offer a higher quality tourism experience along La Ruta Amistad. The community-based tourism initiatives found along this route typically have poor facilities and lack customer service skills. Both of these aspects should be improved if tourism is to expand in the region.

### ***Strategic Recommendations***

- BSTA and ATEC should work together to identify and secure sources of funding to help build capacity through targeted training programs and improve the facilities of the non-profit organizations and community-based tourism initiatives along the route.
- BSTA and ATEC should organize volunteer programs to help improve the facilities available at the community-based tourism programs. A week of construction, painting, or landscaping volunteer work could be followed by a holiday in either Puerto Viejo or Bocas del Toro.
- BSTA and ATEC should work with existing partners (such as WIDECAST and USAID) to provide targeted training programs that meet mutual objectives.
- BSTA should explore the possibility of establishing a chocolate-themed tour in Bocas del Toro to diversity the products offered in the region.
- BSTA and ATEC should identify a unique event (such as a regatta) or festival that could take place somewhere along La Ruta Amistad. Once this event is determined, sponsors could be identified to defray the costs.

To ensure both organizations continue the bi-national collaboration that began during the USAID-CCAW program, our final recommendation is to continue meeting regularly to develop joint action plans that detail how some of these recommendations will be implemented. Once an action plan has been created, both organizations should sign an MOU committing to how they will agree to work together in the future.

The first signed MOU signifying the official establishment of the bi-national alliance and a willingness to create a promotional passport can be found in Appendix 1.

## MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

### BETWEEN

**BOCAS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ALLIANCE (BSTA)**

### AND

**TALAMANCAN ASSOCIATION OF ECOTOURISM AND CONSERVATION (ATEC)**

This Agreement dated as of **October 1, 2009** between **The Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance** (herein referred to as the BSTA), a non-profit organization having its office at Calle Tercera, Bocas del Toro, Panama, the **Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation** (herein referred to as "ATEC"), a non-profit organization whose address is Puerto Viejo de Limon, Costa Rica.



The **Bocas del Toro Sustainable Tourism Alliance (BSTA)** is a Destination Management Organization operating a tourism information center in the main island of the Bocas del Toro archipelago whose objective is to promote sustainable tourism tours/activities and educate travelers on the natural and cultural resources of the Bocas del Toro province. It undertakes conservation efforts to preserve the cultural and ecological landscape of the province and supports the local and global marketing efforts of all member companies.



Founded in 1989, **The Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation (ATEC)** is Puerto Viejo's original eco-tourism provider working to help visitors find fun ecologically and socially responsible activities to entertain themselves while in Talamanca, Limon, Costa Rica. ATEC currently operates an information center located in Puerto Viejo downtown that arranges eco-and community-based tours in the Talamanca region and supports conservation activities such as recycling, education. .

WHEREAS, The BSTA and ATEC (herein referred to as "the parties") wish to collaboratively develop and promote La Amistad Tourist Passport (herein referred to as "the Project").

NOW THEREFORE the Parties hereby agree to work together in the following manner and under the following conditions.:

#### **1.0 Responsible Authorities**

1.1 BSTA agrees that Renee Kimball will be the main liaison for the project under this agreement. Contact information for Renee Kimball:

Address: Tranquilo Bay, Bocas del Toro

Email: renee@tranquilobay.com  
Phone: 507-380-0721

- 1.2 ATEC agrees to designate Alaine Berg to be the main liaison for the project under this agreement. Contact information for Alaine Berg:

Email: atecmail@gmail.com  
Phone: 506 2750 0191

- 1.3 Solimar International agrees to designate Vicki Brown to be the main liaison for the design of this project under this agreement. Contact information for Vicki Brown:

Address: Caranero Island, Bocas del Toro  
Email: [vicki.solimar@gmail.com](mailto:vicki.solimar@gmail.com)

- 1.4 Solimar International agrees to designate Chris Seek, President, as the authorized representative for this agreement. Contact information for Chris Seek:

Email: [chris.seek@solimarinternational.com](mailto:chris.seek@solimarinternational.com)  
Phone: 202-518-6192 (x101)

## 2.0 The Project

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.

Many visitors visiting the Talamanca region include a visit to the Bocas del Toro archipelago as part of their itinerary. However, due to a lack of promotion and information, most visitors only visit the destinations of Bocas del Toro or Puerto Viejo without visiting the many tourism attractions in between these two main destinations.

Through this MOU, BSTA and ATEC have the opportunity to work together to promote the Talamanca-Bocas region. The Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance and Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation will create **La Ruta Amistad** to intercept the large number of tourists travelling to and from Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica and Bocas del Toro by creating a bi-national strategic alliance. As its first joint initiative, BSTA and ATEC will produce and distribute a co-branded promotional passport. This marketing tool—developed through the support of the USAID-CCAW program—will serve to increase awareness of La Amistad International Park (including biodiversity, indigenous groups,

history, economy, etc.), highlight the tourism offerings within the corredor Bocas del Toro- Puerto Viejo, and provide useful travel tips for tourists when travelling in the region.

### **3.0 Roles and Responsibilities**

Each party agrees to take on certain roles and responsibilities as part of this agreement to be outlined below.

#### **3.1 Roles and Responsibilities of Solimar International (on behalf of the USAID-CCAW program)**

Technical:

- Solimar International will provide graphic design support to produce the La Ruta Amistad promotional passport.

Financial:

- The USAID-CCAW program will provide \$3,500 in initial funding to cover printing costs of La Ruta Amistad promotional passport.

Sales & Marketing:

- Solimar International will provide initial sales & marketing support to help distribute the promotional passport through strategic channels. Promotional support will also include drafting and disseminating a press release and assisting in the development of web site content.

#### **3.2 Roles and Responsibilities of BSTA and ATEC**

Technical:

- BSTA and ATEC agree to collaborate with Solimar International with all necessary documentation related to tours/activities surrounding their destination; and
- BSTA and ATEC agree to collaborate with Solimar International through providing feedback and comments on the design of the co-branded La Ruta Amistad promotional passport.

Financial:

- BSTA and ATEC agree to ask tourists for US\$1 or US\$2 donation in exchange for this co-branded material publication. However, it is considered that this donation might not be sufficient to ensure the financial sustainability of this initiative. Each party agrees to identify additional sources of funding with their respective tourism or related authorities.

Sales & Marketing:

- BSTA and ATEC agree to promote La Ruta Amistad through their respective websites - [www.ateccr.org](http://www.ateccr.org) and [www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com](http://www.discoverbocasdeltoro.com) and information center locations;

- BSTA and ATEC agree to promote La Ruta Amistad to tour operators, hotels, and other entities they have relations to;
- BSTA and ATEC agree to jointly pursue potential sponsorships that could contribute to the sustainability of this initiative.

#### **4.0 Terms and Termination**

This MoU will remain in effect from the date it is signed until September 30<sup>th</sup> 2010. It is anticipated that at that point, based upon the success of the Project and the partnership, a new MoU may be developed between the Parties. Other areas of collaboration could be further assessed such as facilitating the immigration condition process at border Sixiaola-Guabito.

Except as expressly provided, all rights and obligations of the Parties under this Agreement shall terminate on the earliest of the following:

- 4.1 Mutual written agreement of the Parties to terminate this Agreement;
- 4.2 At any time or for any reason upon thirty (30) days written notice by any of the Parties of this Agreement to the other Parties.
- 4.3 In case of potential issues between two parties, BSTA and ATEC could choose either to apply the Panamanian or the Costa Rican law.

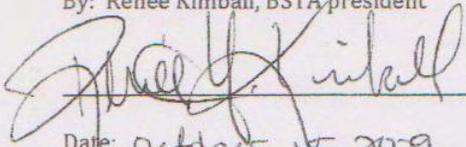
**5. Signatures**

In witness whereof, the parties to this MOU through their duly authorized representatives have executed this MOU on the days and dates set out below, and certify that they have read, understood, and agreed to the terms and conditions of this MOU as set forth herein.

The effective date of this MOU is the date of the signature last affixed to this page.

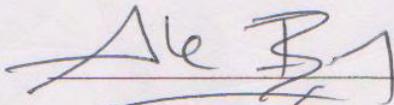
**BSTA**

By: Renee Kimball, BSTA president

  
Date: October 15, 2009

**ATEC**

By: Alaine Berg, ATEC Executive Director

  
Date: 15-Oct-2009

**Solimar International**

By: Chris Seek, President

  
Date: 10-15-09