

ETC 2008 RESPONSIBLE TOURISM SHOWCASE HONOREE

YACHANA LODGE and SCHOOL OF GEOTOURISM

INTRODUCTION

We at Yachana Lodge and the Yachana Foundation believe that the future of the rainforest is inextricably linked to the well-being of its inhabitants. Only those who call the rainforest their home can ensure its biodiversity and cultural survival. Yachana is a Quichua indigenous language word that means “A Place for Learning”. We feel that education is the best way to achieve these goals, so in August 2005, the Yachana Foundation (formally called FUNEDESIN) with Yachana Lodge, opened the Yachana Technical High School. It is the only school in Ecuador offering a degree in Ecotourism and Sustainable Development and is accredited by the Ministry of Education. Yachana Lodge provides the primary source of funding for the operation of the school and is a vitally important training facility for the students. Yachana High School is a regional boarding school comprised of 80% indigenous students, from five Amazonian provinces within Ecuador, representing four ethnic groups; and 20% mestizo students from rural backgrounds. The instruction is a practical, hands-on approach to learning. The curriculum includes Geotourism, organic agriculture on our sustainable farm, conservation on our 4,300 acres of rainforest and micro enterprise development. All of the guests who come to Yachana Lodge visit and participate with the students in many different activities. This interaction has proven to be our greatest attraction of our tourism program.

Yachana Lodge, which opened in 1995, the high school and our biological field station are all located on our 4,300 acres of rainforest. We are located 2.5 hours by motorized canoe up the Napo River from the provincial capital of Coca, where there is an airport for tourists to fly into. All of the land was declared a Protected Forest by the Ministry of the Environment in 2004. We are within the buffer zone of the Sumaco National Park, a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve.

BEST PRACTICES

In December 2007, Yachana Lodge received the Smart Voyager certification as a leading example of sustainable tourism in Ecuador, in conjunction with Rainforest Alliance in New York. To receive this certification requires extensive compliance in environmental and operational procedures. All of our water is spring water with meters to measure usage in the Lodge. All waste water from the lodge is treated in a septic system. Most of our electricity for the Lodge is provided by solar energy with a back-up generator for peak times. Our composting and recycling center is part of the Yachana Technical High School program and processes all of the Lodge’s waste. All organic waste is composted for use on our gardens and all plastic, glass, carton and metal is compacted, separated and shipped to a recycling center in the provincial capital for ultimate disposal. All soaps, detergents and cleaning supplies are biodegradable. Fuel storage and handling all meet high standards of compliance. The Smart Voyager certification is an ongoing process and

requires annual audits to make sure all of the requirements are met and maintained. In addition, we have formed our own “green team” within our key staff and students to do quarterly audits to maintain quality. The Smart Voyager certification has very high standards and speaks of our commitment toward environmental protection and sustainable tourism.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND SENSITIVITY

Yachana Lodge puts a major emphasis on supporting and preserving the local indigenous cultures. In November 2007, we received a grant from the National Geographic Society Conservation Trust for the development of the Yachana Amazon Culinary Center. This project is to preserve the knowledge and use of traditional indigenous Amazonian foods and their methods of preparation. Part of this project will include Yachana Lodge offering Amazon Culinary Tours for our visitors starting in mid 2008. This will give visitors a chance to go out with our students, most of whom are indigenous, harvest the local ingredients and take them back to our kitchen to prepare them to eat.

As a part of our Geotourism approach to tourism, we are involving as many local people as we can, all of whom are indigenous. We offer visits to a local medicine man for a traditional cleansing program, a woman from the community gives demonstrations in Quichua pottery making and basket weaving, and a family gives demonstrations in gold panning. We also pay two farmers for the use of their land where we take tourists to see specific attractions. The students at the high school are making tagua jewelry and woven bracelets to sell through the Lodge shop or directly to visitors at the high school. All four of the ethnic groups of high school students give presentations in their respective languages to help reinforce the value of their cultures.

OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM

With the launch of the Yachana Technical High School in September 2005, we are addressing a tremendous need for practical education on a regional basis, and establishing a model for application on a national basis. We are still eight months away from our first graduating class but we can already see the impact that our innovative form of education is having on the development of our 128 students. Many of our students are older because they previously had no options to further their education where they lived. Therefore, a measure of the success of our program is that our students are here because they want to be, if not, they would simply leave. As a result of their interest, we have had only an 8% attrition rate.

Our education program is working because it is designed for young people from poor, remote environments. It deviates from the national methods dictated by the government by providing applicable, hands-on instruction rather than impractical, classroom theory. We have divided our 128 students into two groups who rotate every 28 days between our boarding school and their homes throughout the Amazon region. Our program has the students working every morning for one week in one of four areas: ecotourism, agriculture, conservation and micro-enterprise. After one week, students rotate to another

area of study. In the afternoons, instead of having classroom instruction, we have three hours of workshops where the students are investigating different subjects, using the satellite connected internet, applying some of the theory they are learning and learning how to integrate their education into their everyday lives. During these workshops, we incorporate math, science, English and other subjects to provide a well-rounded, practical education. At Yachana we believe education is the catalyst for rainforest preservation, economic independence and cultural understanding. Our students are “living their learning”.

STAFF HIRING AND TRAINING PRACTICES

Yachana Lodge believes in using people from the region. We have 27 employees, of whom 92% are native to local communities. The Lodge has an active training program for our staff. We are the only Ecuadorian Amazon lodge who has specialized in using only indigenous guides who speak English. Only those who have grown up in the forest can really interpret the biological and cultural intricacies of the rainforest in a meaningful manner. We have sent four of our guides to the United States for language training so they can provide better service for our visitors. Our indigenous chefs have also received training in food preparation in Quito and the provincial capital of Tena. The National Geographic Society grant for our culinary center is allowing us to hire an indigenous nutritionist consultant to further reinforce the use of traditional foods to serve to our guests. We provide ongoing training for our administrators and canoe operators. And as a part of the Smart Voyager Sustainable Tourism certification, we are providing training to all of our Lodge staff on a regular basis in first aid, emergency preparedness, hospitality management and many other subjects.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

All of the 4,300 acres of rainforest owned by the Yachana Foundation is declared a protected forest by the Ministry of the Environment. This forest is providing an incredibly important safe habitat for forest species that would otherwise be threatened by local farmers. To reinforce our work in conservation, we have built a biological field station that is managed by the U.K. group Global Vision International (GVI). As a result of their ongoing investigations and data collection, a rare and endemic species of Glass Frog was discovered in September 2006 that is new to science. GVI has teams conducting research and monitoring on the land 40 weeks per year. A group of our students, who are studying conservation, are with them at all times and are being trained in conservation and the methods of biodiversity monitoring and data collection. The training of these young people from the Amazon is the future for the protection of the rainforest. These students now have an understanding of the importance of conserving the forest that they never had before. Only those who call the forest their home can really provide long term, sustainable protection of their environment.

LOCAL INCOME GENERATION INITIATIVES

Yachana Lodge has many indirect beneficiaries of its operation. These include farmers who provide fruits and other foods we serve to our guests and others who provide different cultural programs for our visitors. All of these people receive payment for these demonstrations based on the number of guests who go.

Yachana Lodge provides one of its two administrators on a regular basis to work with five of the 16 community micro-finance banks that the Foundation has established over the past seven years. This employee makes regular visits to the communities and serves on their governing boards to provide technical assistance. These 16 community banks now involve 428 members. They have increased the total capital being managed by their banks by 810% and a 209% increase in the average loan amount to \$95.81. These micro credit programs are helping people living in remote areas of the Amazon region improve their lives and alleviate poverty.

The Yachana High School has several micro-enterprises that are helping to generate funds so the school can be more sustainable. By the end of 2007, with just over two years of operation, the school is generating 21% of its operating budget through these micro-enterprises. This program is putting a major emphasis on training our students to become entrepreneurs, giving them the skills to manage a small business and showing them what they can do within their communities to generate income. The average income of the student's families is around \$300 per year. This enterprise initiative will help these students not only lift themselves out of poverty, but through the development of micro-franchises or micro-enterprises, they will be helping others in their communities to improve their lives.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The Yachana Foundation was the incubator for the two for-profit companies; Yachana Lodge and Yachana Gourmet. The Foundation and its two for-profit companies have managed many community development projects since it began in 1991, investing approximately 5.2 million dollars in four Amazon provinces through projects and its income generating companies. One of the companies is Yachana Gourmet, a socially responsible organization working to develop fair-trade chocolate products using cacao from the Amazon region of Ecuador. As a result of this project for the commercialization of Amazon cacao, which has been operating since the year 2000, there are now 2,140 farmers, representing approximately 14,500 inhabitants, who have improved their family incomes. They now have their own farmers association. The fair-trade markets that Yachana Gourmet has opened have resulted in an average 26% higher price paid to the farmers for their cacao. The program has promoted the planting of 2,095 additional acres of cacao. And the average yield of cacao per farmer has increased by 61% through our technical assistance program. These are just a few examples of the success of this initiative. All of the aspects of the chocolate operation, including serving our chocolate to our Lodge guests at virtually every meal in different forms, are incorporated into the tourism experience.

OUR INTERPRETATION PROGRAMS

We believe that the only real way to conserve biodiversity is through education of Ecuadorian youth. As a part of this initiative, in July 2007, we received a grant that is allowing us to develop the Yachana Rainforest Interpretative Center. This facility, which is under construction and will be finished in the second quarter of 2008, will provide an orientation center for school children, specifically from throughout the Amazon region, and high school and university students from throughout Ecuador and the world. These young people will visit and receive an overview of what the Foundation is doing in sustainable development and wildlife conservation and then go and visit the many projects that are in operation throughout our facilities. Seeing things that are actually working is much more interesting and educational than static exhibits.

Another program we have is called Jovenes a Jovenes (Youth to Youth). This program started in September 2007 and is geared toward international and national high school and university students. These visiting students spend around one week and live at the school, not at the Yachana Lodge, therefore, the cost is much less and facilities much simpler. Our students, many of whom speak reasonably good English, serve as their guides and the visitors participate in all of the daily activities that our students are involved in. These include eco-tourism, sustainable organic agriculture, micro-enterprise development and conservation. They see how the Yachana Lodge operates. They visit the solar and hydroelectric projects, see how our program of recycling is working and how we are incorporating the program into other communities. They visit and see the biodigester and charcoal farming methods and participate in the cultural preservation of the traditional foods and cooking methods through the Yachana Amazon Culinary Center. In the end, the visiting students take back a thorough understanding of what is involved in sustainable development and environmental protection and how these practices can be applied in their own schools and communities. For both the national and international students, this program is proving to have a tremendous impact on the lives of these young people.

MICRO ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

The high school has developed several different micro-enterprises to help it become self sufficient. The most important of these is a low cost, very simple water filter that is designed for those living at the Base of the Pyramid economically. These filters are being bought by individuals, foundations, municipal governments and companies for distribution to mostly rural, elementary one-room schools. Water filters have now been placed in more than 200 schools, serving a population of approximately 7,500 elementary school children who did not have access to potable water. All of our visitors go to our workshops where they can see the students working in their different enterprises. Many visitors leave donations to allow us to continue to place these filters in more schools. Our Foundation has a U.S. 501 C 3 not for profit corporation to facilitate tax exempt donations.

HEALTH INITIATIVES

We built the Mondaña Medical Clinic in 1997 that provides medical services to around 6,000 people in the region. The only access is via foot or canoe. Two years ago, we turned the clinic over to the Ministry of Health to ensure its long term sustainability; but we continue to be very involved. As a part of the high school program, we have broadband, high speed, satellite internet service, powered by solar energy. Because of the expanse of our operation, we have installed a wireless coverage, with solar powered repeaters, that reaches over a 14 mile radius. Since the signal is covering the entire region, and beyond our actual land, we are providing the Mondaña Clinic, and a smaller sub-medical center in Puerto Rico, with tele-medicine capability. This program is operated by the Foundation and allows both of these medical facilities, managed by the Ministry of Health, to have internet access to the finest hospital in Quito, the capital, as well as the rest of the world. This hospital is providing consultation at no cost to the remote medical staff in the event they have problems they can not solve. This is the only program of tele-medicine in Ecuador. Yachana Lodge is the only jungle lodge in Ecuador that can offer full time medical services to our guests. This is a very important point for tourism operators to know this service is available if necessary.

VOLUNTEERISM

Yachana Lodge has a number of opportunities for different levels of volunteers. We constantly need native English speakers, who will commit to a one year stay, to teach ESL at the high school. We offer opportunities for medical students in their 3rd or 4th year rotations to come and spend a minimum of three weeks working in the Mondaña clinic. Other volunteers, who have specific skills that can help us at the school, come for varying amounts of time. Yachana is truly “A Place for Learning”!