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## SUMMARY REPORT OF SITE VISIT: ECOTOURISM

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The “Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS” is a relatively new effort to create a place for further conservation of nature and eco-development, in combination with sustainable tourism. It was recognized as an important effort, and was officially named a Public Interest Project” by the Costa Rican Government in 1997. The Center is an integrated ecotourism destination featuring lodging, meals, nature reserve, museum, botanical gardens, an on-site archaeological excavation, and a number of other interesting features.

The SarapiquíS complex is located at the border of the Tirimbina Biological Reserve in La Virgen de Sarapiquí, 85 kilometers from San Jose. On this side of the foothills of the Cordillera Central mountain range, the Sarapiquí River flows past the towns and villages of the Sarapiquí region, creating a superb riverine corridor for a diversity of wildlife. For centuries, and perhaps millennia, this region has been home to a number of different indigenous peoples. More recently, this area has seen fairly rapid growth in environmentally oriented tourism. The rich wildlife, relatively intact ecosystems and accessibility to tourists from different points in the country have made it an important “ecotourism” destination.

Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS, is modeled on a pre-Colombian village, and was designed and developed as an eco-model project using ecological sustainable technologies (solar energy, use of local natural materials, and an innovative wetland waste-water treatment installation, etc...)

### 2 SARAPIQUIS ECOLOGE

The architecture of the project is inspired by the indigenous pre-Columbian construction techniques of the region. The round palenques (or ranchos) are covered by a traditional thatched roof of palm leaves. The palenque structure is central to the SarapiquíS concept: the story of nature and its relation to mankind.

The ecolodge consists of four palenque structures. Three contain guest rooms, and the fourth is the central building with the lobby, restaurant, bar, gourmet coffee bar, photo gallery, administration, and gift shop.

The three guest units are divided into eight spacious and deluxe rooms, jointed within the turret reaching an impressive height of 18 meters. All the units are located in the gardens and orchards of the property. Many of the rooms have an outstanding view of the rainforest canopy; while others are nestled in the gardens.

### 3 TIRIMBINA BIOLOGICAL RESERVE

The Tirimbina Biological Reserve is key to the entire concept of the Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí.

The 300-hectare Tirimbina Biological Reserve is one of the last remaining stands of mid-elevation, premontane rainforest in northeastern Costa Rica. The reserve is teeming with the diversity of botanical and zoological species characteristic of such ecosystems, and provides an important component of the biological corridors that link habitats for regional wildlife. Tirimbina has been the site of numerous biological research projects and serves as a living laboratory for study, as well as an accessi-

ble day trip from different parts of the country.

An island with lush tropical vegetation lies between Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS and the Tirimbina Biological Reserve in the middle of the Sarapiquí River. Varying in size with the volume of the water rushing off the Barva volcano watershed, this island offers an easily navigated introduction to a tropical forest ecosystem through a self-guided tour. The river itself is a rich and vital corridor for tropical wildlife. A 260m long suspension bridge connects the Centro Neotropico SarapiquíS to the Tirimbina Reserve.

Several trails cross the reserve for access by researchers and visitors. These trails approach areas of high interest for wildlife watching or viewing highlights of rainforest biodiversity. Because it is a protected area, they are designed to create the least negative impact possible on delicate ecosystems. The company of a trained naturalist or other staff member of Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS is required, except for researchers with permits.

Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS offers field based education in nature history for adults and children, emphasizing the interrelatedness of individual systems and species in the natural world. The Tirimbina Biological Reserve is a place for illumination of some of the mysteries of the rainforest and for experiencing the innate response of humans to wildness and natural beauty.

#### **4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK “ALMA ATA”**

The Park “Alma Ata” at the Centro Neotropico SarapiquíS is the first archaeological park of its kind in Costa Rica. The Park is set in the orange orchard of Centro Neotropico SarapiquíS, where in October 1999, a large exquisite Pre-Columbian

tomb field of at least 600 years old was dis-

covered.

The Park has been developed in close coordination with Costa Rican National Museum.

Four major themes are exhibited in the park :

- Theme 1 : 15th century Costa Rica: Reconstruction of housing, streets and marketplaces of the indigenous village
- Theme 2 : Pre-Columbian Stone Sculptures
- Theme 3 : Pre-Columbian Burial Field. Excavation site in process including “casita” of archaeologist with exhibition of tools, materials, etc...
- Theme 4 : Petroglyphs. Reconstruction of a rocky landscape with petroglyphs.

Extensive information is provided all along the trails in the park. Landscape Foundation Belgium, owner of the Centro Neotropico, has had on staff since May 2000 two very skilled Costa Rican archaeologists: Anagency Herrera for the excavation of the tombs, and Javier Artavia for the reconstruction of the 15<sup>th</sup> century village,. All the works has been done under supervision of the National Museum of Costa Rica.

#### **5 RAINFOREST MUSEUM**

A 1000 m<sup>2</sup> museum will be opening in April 2002. It will be the largest on-site-museum of rainforest ecology and pre-Columbian history of Central America and will include a 60-seat theater A dynamic and contemporary audio and visual concept that makes use of state-of-the-art technology and presentation techniques will present the main themes of the museum

- Biodiversity
- Sounds of the rainforest
- Pre-Columbian cultures
- Conservation

- The endangered rainforest

## 6 SARAPIQUIS GARDENS

The gardens of Centro Neotrópico SarapiquíS are designed to demonstrate and to reflect the richness of the rainforest. They also link several aspects of Centro Neotrópico. It is an introduction to the Tirimbina Forest, illustrating topics presented in the SarapiquíS Museum, and also an education in botany and horticulture. The Gardens are comprised of four distinct elements:

- Plants of historical or economic value, including medicinal and edible.
- Tropical plants both ornamental and vital to wildlife.
- Natural botanical succession.
- Reforestation of agricultural land, as a transition to the Tirimbina rainforest

Each element is expressed by a different design:

- The first garden is formal, with several specific themes. It is easily accessible for casual visits or study.
- Around the main building, gardens are less formal, with an emphasis on plants attracting hummingbirds and butterflies.
- In the old orange orchard, the natural succession of epiphytes, orchids, ferns and other genera demonstrate a lesson in tropical ecology.

The orchard remains in use, however no longer with an emphasis on production. Grass continues to be mowed, however epiphytism will have full freedom to develop (orchids, ferns, etc), eventually destroying the orchard in a natural way, but giving during those years a splendid opportunity to explain ecology.

The portion of land on the floodplain below the buildings is partially cultivated for food and is partially under reforestation. Fast - growing species are plant-

ed here to prepare a microclimate for later woody species of a higher biological interest. Special attention is paid to woody species of the Rubiaceae and Acanthaceae as research collections will be used in major research projects of the National Botanic Garden of Belgium. Part of the land is used for wastewater treatment and purifications plants using living plants.

## 7 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

- Ecotourism in general generates income that helps protect endangered ecosystems. This is certainly the case in Costa Rica. Forest and other sensitive habitat that would have been destroyed for agricultural use remains intact due to the value they provide to the tourism sector. Today, Costa Rica receives more than 1.1 million tourist per year. Nearly all come with the expectation of seeing nature and participating in a "natural" experience in the wild. In response to this demand, there has been a rapid growth in tourism infrastructure (particularly hotels and lodges). Increased demand places increased pressure on remaining habitat. How should Costa Rica or other countries take advantage of demand for protected habitat to build healthy tourism industries (that create jobs, income and educational opportunities for needy rural communities), while still maintaining the integrity of the resources tourists want to visit?
- Centro Neotropico SarapiquiS is but one model being used. Is it a good model? In what ways yes, and in what ways no?