



SMALL GRANTS PROGRAMME

Rural and ethnic tourism in the community of El Guabo de Yorkín

Beneficiary: Mujeres cuidando montaña (ALAKOLPA)

Location: Bribri -community of El Guabo de Yorkín, District of Changuinola, Bocas del Toro, Panamá

Contribution PPD: US\$ 28,758.00

In-kind cofinancing: US\$ 30,550.00

Project Duration: Jul 2013 – Feb 2015

Number of people served: 61

Focal Area: Biodiversity

Context

The community of el Guabo de Yorkín is inhabited by the indigenous group Bribri. It is located in the buffer zone of the International Park La Amistad (PILA), in the province of Bocas del Toro, next to the border with Costa Rica. The area is ideal to promote community-based tourism with its rich biodiversity, beautiful scenery and unique cultural history. The area is sparsely populated by the indigenous groups of Bribri and Naso. It is relatively challenging to access and therefore does not count with public services. There is no electricity except for solar panels.

For many years the women of the community were willing to form up a group and the organization ALAKOLPA was finally legally founded in 2012. All of the members of the organization are Bribri women who were encouraged by a

similar organization on the Costa Rican side of the Yorkín River. Some of the members of ALAKOLPA have previous experience in working with community-based tourism in the neighboring community of Yorkín, Costa Rica. However, now they felt ready to start developing tourism in their own community, which led to this project proposal to the SGP. This has been the first project with other institutions, which has enabled the establishment of alliances for example with the "Red Talamaqueña de Turismo Rural Comunitario" from Costa Rica, to promote touristic services in the community.

By this project ALAKOLPA hopes to diversify their income opportunities without having to leave the community for work purposes and without abandoning agriculture, which is the main income source in the area. At the moment work opportunities in the community are difficult. A key factor is to strengthen their own traditional culture and habits. The area is suitable for hiking and sighting a variety of birds and animals since it is surrounded by nature. The touristic activities in the community include learning about the culture Bribri by getting acquainted with the local gastronomy using ecological products grown in the area, learning traditional chocolate making, use of natural medicine and extraction of sugar-cane juice etc. In general, the Bribri are an indigenous group that has been able to live in harmony with the nature.

Project objectives and key activities

The objective of the project was to create opportunities in the community of El Guabo de Yorkín by developing rural and ethnic tourism of a low impact for the environment. A crosscutting theme is to strengthen and



revitalize the culture Bribri. Concrete activities include the establishment of a medicinal garden and an agro ecological plot, building accommodation for visitors, installation of environmentally friendly technologies such as a solar panel, an eco stove and a solar dehydrator. The project enabled to publish a small leaflet on the community and the culture Bribri called "Alakolpa Kabata Könuak".

Environmental impact

Community-based rural tourism is an environmentally sustainable activity. This project has contributed to the valuation and sustainable use of natural resources in the community. By installing environmentally friendly technologies (solar panel, eco stove, solar dehydrator) it is possible to reduce carbon emissions and replace other technologies harmful to the environment. Land is no longer burnt for agricultural purposes nor forest is cut down. The use of organic production is being promoted by establishing a medicinal garden and an agro ecological plot. It aims to diminish the use of agrochemicals and modified seeds as well as the need to buy groceries from outside. The project contributed towards reduction of plastics use in the community. These environmental impacts are important as the community is located in the sensitive buffer zone of the International Park La Amistad.

Socio-Economic Impact

The members of the organization have gained new skills for example in administration, managing funds and receiving visitors. The project has benefitted not only members of the organization but also other members of the community by learning to appreciate more the culture Bribri. The focus has been especially on the use and investigation of traditional medicine and plants and transferring knowledge to younger generations. Other community-members have benefitted by selling their products and helping with the construction work. The project has valued the position of the women as decision-makers and working also outside of the house. Even though the decisions in the organization are made by women, it does not mean that men are left outside. In this project men have for example helped in the construction work and other project activities.

Policy Impact, Replication and Scaling up

This kind of project could be replicable in other places but also only some parts of the project could be repeated and made use of in other communities. For example introducing eco stoves, promoting traditional agriculture and the sustainable use of land would be useful in several places even though they would not be engaged in touristic activities.

Lessons Learned

- The commitment and involvement of community members is extremely important to achieve project objectives timely and efficiently.
- The gender perspective was sometimes an issue since it was challenging for the men to understand that the final decision was in the hands of the women. Occasionally men did not wait to listen to the opinions of the women before starting with the activities.



- It is necessary to receive help from outside in these kind of projects. However, one must believe more in oneself.
- Some skills still need to be strengthened such as the use of the calculator, mental arithmetic, knowledge of foreign currencies and the exchange rate to be able to determine prizes.
- Tourism can create jobs and long term stable incomes in the community if managed well in a sustainable way. Marketing skills play important role in attracting visitors, and the organization has still much to learn and to work on.
- The community of El Guabo de Yorkín can be recognized as a pioneer in etno tourism in Panamá in the future if the achievements of this project are well taken advantage of.