

This is the Project Report for the First Quarter 2021
Global Grant #1978399 – An Ecotourism Business for Rural Costa Rican Women

Project Summary - This grant has three components: (1) Training Rural Women to launch and run a tourism business where they become licensed under Costa Rican law as Tour Guides, or they become licensed under Costa Rican Law to be tourism venues. (2) – To refurbish a 75-year-old house on the campus of the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) to become an Eco-Hotel for international travelers to learn about sustainable living. (3) Build 4 aquaponic gardens in rural areas that lack fresh produce and to provide meals for tour groups using the aquaponic gardens as both a tourist venue and a small restaurant (Soda) for tourist dining.

For the last 14 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended this project. Areas of this project related to tourism rapidly decelerated and are still today struggling to recover. Yet, the agricultural component has been wildly successful, reaching far beyond the rural food deserts of the original project by feeding Costa Rican communities that have lost their incomes due to the pandemic.

The short documentary film about this project has been viewed by Rotarians, Rotary Clubs and educational institutions around the world and continues to be available. At the height of the pandemic in the US, when Rotary clubs turned to online meetings, they were able to show the film and have some of the women of RETUS join the meetings through Zoom to answer questions and share more information about their tours.

The Network of Women Entrepreneurs of Sustainable Tourism in Turrialba (**RETUS**). As of this report, RETUS tour operations is closed. The Canton of Turrialba, where this project resides is experiencing another outbreak of COVID-19. Rural communities are closed to not only tourists but other outside visitors including our Rotary network there.

The Costa Rica Ministry of Tourism has used the last 14 months to transform and update their regulations regarding Tourism. Any person or business connected to the tourism industry must now be documented and regulated. This has also been an opportunity to evaluate the quality of tours, safety measures, controlling licensing and bringing income from these new laws back to the government.

We are pleased that the RETUS women have pivoted to these new regulations and are registered as a tourism business as well as individuals offering tours. They have carried the expense of these changes in their business budget. A new regulation of concern is with butterfly breeders and tours. The new directive from the Ministry is that these 2 businesses must be licensed and located separately. Therefore, Hogar de Mariposas is no longer offering tours but is acting only as a breeder/exporter.

Since March 2020, RETUS has entertained only one tour group. Most of the communities remain unvaccinated and closed to non-Costa Ricans. Costa Rican young adults and youth are not slated for vaccination until 2022. It is anticipated, then, that to keep the women of RETUS together as a business, Rotary will need to put additional effort into business training and understanding the certification process.

The Sustainability House Eco-Hotel is now under CATIE administration. It is open for guest bookings and is supporting itself from the income. CATIE has hired a hotel administrator to manage guest bookings, cleaning and maintenance. This woman was part of the original Rotary team that refurbished the house. She is now also a Rotarian. Behind the Sustainability House is the organic garden and the aquaponic

garden house. CATIE hired an international agronomist to study Costa Rica's indigenous crops that have disappeared over the years. The gardens have proven to be a valuable research opportunity. Many of these plants are now growing, cooked and eaten by guests at the Sustainability House. Many of the guests staying there are researchers and educators in food production and crop yield. Clearly, this Rotary project has elevated the global status of CATIE. Once CATIE recognized the profound impact that the Eco hotel (incidentally the first building on the CATIE campus) had for global academics and the revenue that could be generated from the hotel, they dedicated funds for general maintenance, upkeep and the management position, thus making the Sustainability House a globally recognized location for environmental "hands on" education and research.

Aquaponic Gardens in the Communities. In all, there are now five aquaponic gardens in the rural communities of Turrialba. The RETUS women who maintain these gardens have given a large amount of their produce to their communities. Because we did not know how long COVID would last, we didn't think to invite the RETUS women to keep track of the amount of produce they grew and gave away. What we do know is that families with no income are able to get produce for free and that, what is being grown is a healthy addition to their diet. Many Costa Ricans have marginal health and may be more susceptible to the virus. We believe that better food leads to healthier rural communities. An unexpected outcome has been that the young people in these areas have taken an interest in the culinary arts, preparing meals from what they have grown themselves either in the Aquaponic gardens or in ground gardens.

Conclusion. We expect to support this project well into 2023. Our biggest learning has been that the communities rely on and trust the women of RETUS to keep them safe from being exposed to COVID from outsiders and to generously donate what they have grown and learned to grow. Knowing the women of RETUS are passing this knowledge along to other generations is a gift to Rotary in itself.