THE LA RUTA MOSKITIA ECOTOURISM ALLIANCE: A CASE STUDY

LINKING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AND BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION IN THE RIO PLÁTANO BIOSPHERE RESERVE, HONDURAS

WRITTEN BY: MATTHEW HUMKE

WITH SUPPORT FROM LUCIA PRINZ & ELMOR WOOD

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SUMMARY

The following case study documents the establishment of the La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance in the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras, from 2002 to 2007. The case study introduces the various project partners that supported the creation of the Alliance, as well as discusses the economic, environmental, and social objectives that the project set out to achieve.

The establishment of the La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance took place in a series of project phases, which are described within the case study chronologically. These phases include project planning, alliance formation, business planning and development, operations training and management, sales and marketing, and monitoring and evaluation.

The case study also documents the creation of the region’s first indigenous conservation NGO, established by the La Ruta Moskitia Alliance in 2007.

The various environmental, economic, and social impacts of the formation of the La Ruta Moskitia Alliance are described in detail within the case study.

The case study concludes with a description of ten key lessons learned in the formation of La Ruta Moskitia, as well as an appendix that includes actual documents and resources that were created in the process of establishing La Ruta Moskitia.

KEYWORDS

La Moskitia, La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance, Honduras, Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Rare Conservation, UNDP, GEF Small Grants Program, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, UN Environment Programme, UN Foundation, ecotourism, sustainable tourism, adventure tourism, nature tourism, Miskito, Pech, Garifuna, SMEs, small business development, small business training, poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation, cultural preservation, small scale ecolodge development, nature guide training, deforestation, cattle grazing, overfishing, sustainable economic alternatives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Humke is the Senior Manager of Enterprises for Rare Conservation, and coordinated the formation of the La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance from 2003 to 2007 along with Elmor Wood, Lucia Prinz, and the members of the Alliance. Matthew has fifteen years of experience building community-based tourism enterprises that support poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. He currently lives in Washington DC.

Matthew Humke: mhumke@rareconservation.org / matthewhumke@gmail.com
1840 Wilson Blvd. Suite 204, Arlington, VA 20010 - USA
+1.703.522.5070 / +1.571.278.9078

Elmor Wood: brus_yakal@yahoo.com / info@larutamoskitia.com
Lucia Prinz: lprinz@rareconservation.org / mlprinz@gmail.com
INTRODUCTION

Ever since Christopher Columbus became the first European to set foot in the remote region of Honduras known as “La Moskitia” during the early sixteenth century, the vast rainforests and rich indigenous groups of this unique area have long intrigued explorers. La Moskitia, or the Mosquito Coast, continues to call out to modern-day explorers today who are drawn to its rich culture and untamed natural areas.

Providing that path to adventure is La Ruta Moskitia, an alliance of five community-owned and operated tourism enterprises. La Ruta Moskitia offers multi-day tours featuring authentic cultural exchange and a variety of activities such as bird watching, jungle trekking, and crocodile spotting. Clients travel the rivers and lagoons of La Moskitia in motorized dugout canoes, and stay in community-owned ecododges and palm-thatched cabañas.

Launched in January 2006 and currently in its third year of operations, La Ruta Moskitia has infused more than US $350,000 into local economies, created 250 jobs, and supports 1500 immediate family members in the Reserve. In 2007, the Alliance also formed the region’s first indigenous environmental conservation NGO that coordinates a number of unique conservation strategies that includes a conservation fund supported by 10% of all gross tour sales.

The Alliance has received international recognition for the quality of its products, as well as its support of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation. These accolades include the World Travel and Tourism Council’s Tourism for Tomorrow “Investor in People” award in 2008, the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Award “Best in Park or Protected Area” in 2007, and the Condé Nast Traveler’s coveted Green List in 2006. La Ruta Moskitia was also recently selected as one of National Geographic Adventure’s “Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth” and has been recommended by Lonely Planet, Outside Magazine, as well as a number of other publications.

At the heart of La Moskitia lies the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, a two million acre UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Reserve’s ecosystems include coastal wetlands, mangroves, beaches, expansive pine savanna, and tropical forests. Containing some of Central America’s greatest biodiversity, the Reserve boasts jaguars, sea turtles, manatee, as well as nearly 400 bird species, including the Great Green Macaw and Harpy Eagle.
The Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve is also home to four distinct indigenous groups – the Garifuna, Tawahka, Pech, and Miskito Indians - each with their own unique languages, cultures, and traditions. Unfortunately, La Moskitia is also one of the poorest regions of Central America, where 90% of the indigenous people live below the poverty line.

The formation of the La Ruta Moskitia Alliance was part of multilateral pilot project aimed at linking ecotourism and biodiversity protection in the Reserve. The six-year project, which initiated in 2002, was implemented by UNDP/GEF and Rare, a US-based international conservation organization whose mission is to protect biological diversity by enabling local people to benefit from its preservation. Partners included the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, UN Environment Programme, UN Foundation, and the Reserve management.

Rare and its UN partners initiated the partnership to develop a replicable strategy for achieving long-term biodiversity conservation through integrated ecotourism and awareness strategies. A key element of this approach was improving the quality of life for local residents through ecotourism training, job creation, business planning, and enterprise development. Creating alternative economic opportunities for local communities was selected as part of this comprehensive conservation strategy in La Moskitia due to the existence of economic-based conservation threats.

An expanding population in the region and a growing dependence upon the natural resources for both sustenance as well as additional income has lead to irrevocable impacts to the Reserve’s terrestrial and marine resources. Rivers and coastal lagoons that provide invaluable flood control and sedimentation capture are suffering under the effects of deforestation caused by more and more agricultural plots or “guamiles” being carved from their shores. Illegal hunting and the trade of exotic species is prevalent. In addition, traditional indigenous values and land practices are being lost to slash and burn agricultural techniques introduced by invading, non-indigenous colonists.

**PROJECT PLANNING**

Prior to the formation of La Ruta Moskitia, few visitors found their way to Reserve. Those that did arrived via foreign-owned tour companies that brought in their own food, supplies and guides, and hired local service providers at terribly low wages. In addition, none of the revenue generated by tourism was contributed to the conservation or management of the Reserve.
La Ruta Moskitia set out to change all of that. The region was not only the largest rainforest in Central America with an extremely rich concentration of indigenous diversity; it was one of the last remaining chances to get community-based ecotourism right the first time.

In order to attempt to link ecotourism and biodiversity protection in the Reserve, the project began in 2002 with an extensive analysis of the fore-mentioned conservation threats, a market analysis of tourism supply and demand in the region, and an in-depth assessment of community capacity and interest in managing tourism enterprises.

Based upon these assessments, an overall enterprise development strategy with specific project objectives was identified:

- **Increase the number of jobs and revenue** derived from ecotourism in the Reserve to lessen the pressure of extractive economic behavior such as over-fishing, slash & burn agriculture, and illegal hunting.
- **Develop new infrastructure** (lodging, dining, and transportation services) in indigenous destinations to better allow those communities to become economically linked to in the Reserve
- **Develop a menu of ecotourism products** that increase the awareness of both local residents and visitors about the value of protecting the Reserve’s natural and cultural resources
- **Increase local capacity** in developing, managing, and expanding ecotourism products/services in the Reserve
- **Create an alliance** amongst member communities that reduces internal competition, leverages marketing dollars, and provides the communities a competitive advantage
- **Directly finance local conservation** projects and involvement from a percentage of tourism revenue

La Ruta Moskitia Project Timeline:
ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINING

Work to achieve these objectives began in 2003 with the selection and training of a group of ten local residents as ecotourism small business managers from the five La Ruta Moskitia communities. These ecotourism “Promoters” or extensionists underwent Rare’s intensive three-month entrepreneurial training course in which they learned to identify, develop, and promote community-based ecotourism products and services.

Based upon the project’s initial site assessment, it had been determined that a lack of quality lodging and dining facilities in the Reserve was one of the main challenges to linking local communities to ecotourism and conservation involvement. With this challenge in mind, during the final module of Rare’s entrepreneurial training course the Promoters students worked with community members & leaders to develop funding proposals for tourism infrastructure in their five respective destinations, which were submitted a number of potential funding sources.

The strength of the community-submitted proposals led GEF/UNDP’s Small Grants Program in Honduras (PPD – Programa de Pequeñas Donaciones) to award the five La Ruta Moskitia communities a total of $189,000 US in grant funds in early 2004. This award primarily supported the costs of building materials for new tourism infrastructure including lodging, dining facilities, and boats and motors for transportation. The grant funds were dependent upon a significant “in kind” contribution from the communities themselves. This contribution came in the form of more than 1500 work days that the member communities dedicated to the collection of building materials and construction of the ecolodges, cabañas, and dining facilities.

ALLIANCE FORMATION

With the start-up capital acquired, the ecotourism Promoters formally established 20-30 person “ecotourism enterprise groups” within each La Ruta Moskitia community. The formation of these groups achieved multiple objectives.

First, it helped to distribute the financial benefits of the enterprises amongst a variety of community members rather than a select few, a socio-economic condition that is prevalent in many indigenous societies. Second, it exponentially increased the number of individuals directly linked to a sustainable economic activity, which was critical to the various conservation strategies described later in this document. Finally, it provided the required labor force to actually construct and manage the ecotourism facilities.

Appendix Reference:
Brus Laguna PPD Funding Proposal – Summary & Budget (Spanish)
Next, the five member indigenous communities agreed to the formation of an alliance which would become La Ruta Moskitia. The Alliance was critical for a variety of reasons. First, it grouped complimentary tourism destinations (and ecosystems) into attractive tour packages. Second, the negotiating position of the collective alliance with buyers and suppliers was stronger than that of the individual enterprises. Third, the Alliance eliminated internal competition and “price wars” that often occur with new businesses in small markets. Finally, the Alliance allowed all five community destinations to leverage promotional dollars by sharing the costs of a single web page, print promotional materials, and advertising.

The Alliance includes a general assembly made up of all of the enterprise members from the three founding La Ruta Moskitia member communities: Raista, Belen, and Brus Laguna. One member from each of those founding communities also makes up the Alliance’s Board of Directors. Elmor Wood, a local resident from the community of Brus Laguna who worked with Rare to establish the Alliance, is the Executive Director who manages both the tourism and conservation activities and managerial staff of the Alliance. The remaining staff roles/ responsibilities are explained later in the “Operations Training & Management” section.

From a community-development and conservation perspective, the formation of the Alliance also had strategic benefits. Bringing together five different communities under the umbrella of the Alliance created important dialog amongst different stakeholders, even from different ethnic groups, which proved to be critical to both the business development process, as well as the eventual conservation work of La Ruta Moskitia. In addition, the collective voice of five successful enterprises employing 250 local residents rings louder than that of a single community with protected area managers, government officials, and funding agencies that may be called upon to support La Ruta Moskitia’s interests or mission.
BUSINESS PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

With the funding in place for the overall tourism infrastructure, the next step was identifying which specific tourism products, services and facilities each La Ruta Moskitia community would offer.

Through a series of participatory workshops coordinated by Rare and the ecotourism Promoters, the five enterprise groups/communities began by reviewing a tourism market analysis that had been carried out by Rare and which assessed regional tourism trends, collected national and local visitor survey data, and interviewed inbound/outbound tour operators and travel representatives. The analysis identified key segments (i.e. European backpackers, American adventure travelers), their “drivers” (i.e. uniqueness, service, price), willingness-to-pay for certain products/services, and the strategic positioning of the products/services for the various segments.

Armed with this information, the five enterprise groups/communities defined which specific tour products and services they would offer through their individual enterprise. They clarified their enterprise’s organizational structure, defining specific roles and responsibilities and training requirements. The enterprise groups also identified community and conservation benefits directly or indirectly related to the creation of the enterprise. Finally, they conducted a basic competition analysis of other tourism service providers in their communities in order to identify competitive advantages.

The results of the participatory business planning process were incorporated into business plans for each individual La Ruta Moskitia enterprise. Additional content included operating plans, legal and risk management considerations, key milestones, and pro forma financial statements that clarified operating costs and income expectations for all members of the enterprise groups.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

To develop the architectural blueprints for the new tourism lodging and dining facilities, two pro bono Honduran architects spent more than three months working directly with the enterprise groups. Via this participatory planning process, the architectural designs and construction plans took into account local sustainable building materials, indigenous and green design elements, site characteristics, and overall aesthetics. The architects also traveled with Rare staff to Belize to visit a number of ecolodges to research best practices in sustainable design and facilities management. Final architectural plans were presented and approved by the enterprise groups in early 2004.

Each of the individual community enterprises submitted requests to the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve managers to construct the lodging and dining facilities from hardwoods and palm-thatch.
collected from local forests. The managers supported the project by reviewing and approving these community requests.

Construction of the La Ruta Moskitia lodging and dining facilities began in May 2004 and was completed by August 2005. 90% of the construction was performed by the enterprise groups themselves, who each underwent a week-long intensive construction seminar and followed detailed manuals developed specifically for the project that guided them step-by-step through the construction process.

The results were simple yet attractive lodges and cabañas that seamlessly blend into the natural backgrounds of the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve. Constructed with park-approved hardwoods collected from local forests and hand-woven palm thatched roofs, the new lodging immerses visitors in the sights and sounds of nature. Whether clients wake up to the sound of waves and gentle breezes coming off of the Caribbean ocean, or to sounds of bird calls and the swaying of tall grass on the pine savannah, they are constantly surrounded by the natural environment.

All of La Ruta Moskitia’s facilities are constructed with passive solar design considerations, and their locations and architectural designs were carefully selected to take advantage of natural ventilation and shade. Bathroom and dining facilities utilize septic tanks that reduce the risk of black-water contamination of local wetlands.

Efforts have also been made to reduce the carbon footprint of the La Ruta Moskitia enterprises. All of the lodging and dining facilities are “off the grid” and do not utilize any fixed source of electricity. Importing any kind of food to the isolated Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve requires a
series of boat and truck transportation. Therefore, clients are served the freshest vegetables, poultry, fish, and meat provided by entirely local sources.

**OPERATIONS TRAINING & MANAGEMENT**

One of the most unique aspects of La Ruta Moskitia is that, aside from a Sales Manager based in the gateway city of La Ceiba, 100% of the Alliance’s 250 members, staff, and management are local indigenous community members. In order to enable these local community members to be successful in their various roles within their enterprises, more than a year of training programs and professional development took place.

The La Ruta Moskitia “Sales Manager” is based in the gateway city of La Ceiba, and is responsible for managing the Alliance’s reservations and sales systems. The Sales Manager communicates with potential clients via email and phone, provides a “trip briefing” to actual clients prior to each trip, and also maintains communications with the Alliance’s sales points throughout the country.

An “Operations Manager”, based in the town of Brus Laguna in the Reserve, was trained to help coordinate the logistics of tour group movements between the five La Ruta Moskitia destinations. Via a network of VHF radios, the operations manager (a local indigenous member) communicates client arrivals and departures, special needs such as dietary restrictions, as well as critical information that can impact tours such as weather and travel delays.

At the individual La Ruta Moskitia enterprise level, each community destination is coordinated by two senior staff. The “General Manager” is responsible for the overall management of the enterprise - coordinating personnel, managing tour logistics, and ensuring customer service and satisfaction. The “Financial Coordinator” is responsible for managing the revenue and costs of the enterprise, staff salaries, as well as distributing year-end profits to members.

Graduates of Rare’s ecotourism Promoters course serve as the General Managers in each of the enterprises, who in turn trained their financial coordinators. A comprehensive operations manual was developed by Rare and the general managers that served as a handbook for training these staff, as well as for coordinating the day to day operations of each enterprise. Topics include reservation and payment systems, tour procedures, communications and conflict resolution, financial procedures, and emergency planning.
In addition to enterprise management, twenty local indigenous guides completed Rare’s ten-week “Nature Guide Training Program” which teaches cutting-edge interpretive techniques, birding skills, tour group management, and basic first aid. A 200-page Rio Plátano-specific natural and cultural history textbook was also created for the nature guide students, and will serve as a resource on the Reserve’s flora, fauna, and history for local communities for years to come.

Finally, kitchen and lodging staff were trained in hygienic food preparation environmentally sound waste management practices, and the culinary “expectations” of visitors (such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and authentic local dishes). The staff were also coached in critical customer service skills, and were shown that it is the subtle details that can make (or break) a client’s travel experience...from freshly folded towels to purified water at the bedside to a welcoming smile.

From day one of business launch in January 2006, the communities of La Ruta Moskitia have expertly managed 100% of tour operations and logistics in the Reserve. From boat transportation to guiding to facilities management, the quality customer service that the communities provide clients is the single greatest reason for La Ruta Moskitia’s success.

SALES & MARKETING

The final step leading up to the launch of La Ruta Moskitia was the development and implementation of the Alliance’s sales and marketing strategy. The strategy included the market analysis already developed for the individual enterprise business plans, as well as the marketing mix (products, pricing, placement, and promotion) which described La Ruta Moskitia’s strategic position in the marketplace.

La Ruta Moskitia’s products range from four to nine days itineraries, and include more affordable “overland” packages (in which clients make and pay their own way to/from La Moskitia) as well as higher-end air-based packages (which include roundtrip airfare costs). Once in La Moskitia, the
two tour package options do not differ, and both include all lodging, food, transportation, and guide services while in La Moskitia.

Depending upon group size, La Ruta Moskitia’s pricing of its overland tour packages averages approximately $75-$100 per day, while its air-based packages average $100-$150 per day. These tour prices are lower than nearly all of the other reputable competitors - even though La Ruta Moskitia pays its tour guides/staff on average 50% more other tour operators and is the only tour company to include a 10% “conservation tax” on all gross tour sales. This competitive advantage is achieved primarily through the use of Rare-trained local guides (rather than expensive “big city” guides), by serving only locally produced food, and by controlling fixed and administrative costs.

Placement (distribution) occurs through both direct and indirect sales. Direct sales take place through La Ruta Moskitia’s sales office in the gateway city of La Ceiba (north coast of Honduras), which is managed by a full-time, commission-based Sales Manager. The Sales Manager’s primary responsibility is to respond to email/phone inquiries from potential clients, and their 24-hours-or-less required response time is one of the main reasons for La Ruta Moskitia’s capture of 80% of the Reserve’s package tour market share. The sales managers also meet with confirmed clients in La Ceiba for pre-trip “briefings” in which a review of itineraries, packing lists, and other trip logistics takes place prior to departure for La Moskitia.

Indirect sales of La Ruta Moskitia tour packages occurs through a network of sales outlets established in the seven major tourism destinations in Honduras (Roatan, Utila, Copan, Tela, Trujillo, San Pedro Sula, and La Ceiba). Each of the sales outlets (established tour companies/travel agencies) promote and sell La Ruta Moskitia tourism packages to walk-in clients, for which they receive a 10% commission.

Between package tours and free & independent travelers arriving to La Ruta Moskitia destinations, the Alliance caters to approximately 750-1000 clients a year, of which 95% are international and 5% domestic. Of the international clients 50% are European, 25% are American, 15% are Canadian, and the remaining 10% are primarily from Australia, New Zealand, and Central American countries. 90% of tour sales are direct and 10% are indirect.

La Ruta Moskitia’s promotional materials and mechanisms fall into four main categories (listed in order of importance): web-based promotion, publicity, print promotion, and advertising.
Without a doubt, one of La Ruta Moskitia’s most effective promotional tools has been its award-winning website. Due to nature of the tour products (extensive multi-day itineraries) the website is intended to act as La Ruta Moskitia’s expanded virtual brochure, with comprehensive tour descriptions, video links, photo galleries, and interactive maps. The website also communicates and promotes the sustainable principles that guide La Ruta Moskitia’s operations and success - from the Alliance’s responsible tourism policy to conservation threats in the Reserve to local environmental initiatives.

Publicity, a free and highly effective promotional mechanism, has also had a significant impact on La Ruta Moskitia’s tour sales. International visitors to Honduras rely heavily upon web-based and print travel guides. La Ruta Moskitia is well documented and highly recommended in *Lonely Planet Honduras*, *Moon Handbooks Honduras*, and *Honduras Tips* (a nationally produced travel guide). In addition, La Ruta Moskitia has been featured in a number of international travel magazines, including *National Geographic Adventure*, *Outside Go*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, and *Men’s Journal*.

*Appendix Reference:*

*La Ruta Moskitia* Press/Publicity Excerpts

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[Images and graphics related to La Ruta Moskitia's website and promotional materials are included in the document.]
Finally, print materials include full-color posters, banners, and promotional bookmarks (which circulate in traveler’s guide books and romance novels much longer than a more expensive brochure) distributed throughout tourism destinations in the Central American region. Advertising is limited to highly targeted, low-cost national tourism publications such as Honduras Tips.

Effort has been made to maintain the common “brand” of La Ruta Moskitia throughout all of the promotional collateral, including taglines, images, fonts, and overall messages.
La Ruta Moskitia merchandise has proven to be not only an additional source of revenue for the community enterprises, but also an effective promotional tool. A selection of short-sleeve shirts, baseball hats, and bucket hats feature La Ruta Moskitia’s two primary logos (including the mysterious indigenous design which is an exact representation of a 1000-year old petroglyph that many La Ruta Moskitia clients visit during their tour).

Managing all of La Ruta Moskitia’s sales and marketing activities is a particularly daunting task, and effectively linking products to markets is one of the greatest challenges of establishing successful community-based ecotourism enterprises. With these challenges in mind, Rare technical staff have developed a sales & marketing manual for La Ruta Moskitia to help with managing the myriad of critical activities and relationships. The manual includes descriptions of target market segments, distribution channels such as sales outlets and phone sales, and key customer relationship management (CRM) for each distribution channel. The manual also describes production procedures for promotional materials, how to update websites, and maintaining public relations with travel guide writers and magazine publishers.

Client Communication, Satisfaction, and Feedback

Delivering a high-quality tourism product begins with the very first interaction that potential clients have with La Ruta Moskitia, which usually take place in the form of a phone call or email exchange. La Ruta Moskitia sales staff are expected to respond to a phone or email inquiry within 24 hours (at the very most) of receiving it. Simply by answering inquiries quickly and professionally, La Ruta Moskitia takes away business from competitors.

All of La Ruta Moskitia trips involve multi-day excursions to one of the most isolated regions of Central America. This type of product demands that sales staff are willing and able to answer a variety of client questions that may come up in planning such an adventure, and up to 5-10 exchanges may take place with a client prior to their booking a trip.

Effective communication continues after the say by offering clients extensive trip information via the Alliance website and pre-departure information such as what to bring, weather information, and suggestions for cultural sensitivity. One day prior to departure, the sales staff meet with clients in La Ceiba to brief clients on their itinerary. Finally, following every tour our operations manager administers an extensive survey that gathers critical client feedback on the Alliance’s lodging, dining, guiding, and transportation services.
PROJECT RESULTS

Economic Impacts

The economic impacts of La Ruta Moskitia on the communities of the Rio Plátano Biosphere have been considerable. By its second year of operations, La Ruta Moskitia had captured approximately 75% of the package tour market share in La Moskitia, resulting in annual gross tour sales in excess of $150,000 US. As of August 2008, La Ruta Moskitia has sold approximately $350,000 in tourism products and services to both package tour clients and independent travelers.

80% of tour-related costs (lodging, food, salaries, and transportation) are economically linked to the Reserve’s communities, resulting in a considerable local economic multiplier effect (see sales figures on next page).

In addition to the more than 250 jobs that La Ruta Moskitia has created (see graphs), the members of each of the individual enterprises derive income from the distribution of year-end profit. Community enterprise profit margins from tour sales have averaged between 35%-40% since La Ruta Moskitia began operations.

Profit Sharing

The value of each member’s percentage of profit is based upon the amount of unpaid labor and time they have contributed to the enterprise over the course of the year in activities such repair and maintenance, as well as their involvement in local conservation activities. This profit-sharing strategy was devised as a way to meet the enterprises’ labor needs, encourage individual investment in the enhancement and growth of the businesses, and provide an additional incentive for environmental activism.

It should be noted that prior to distributing year-end profits, each enterprise determines what percentage of those profits are required for reinvestment back into the business for improvement, expansion, and depreciation of fixed assets. Money is also set aside for La Ruta Moskitia’s administrative costs such as sales and promotion. Historically, La Ruta Moskitia enterprises have reinvested at least half of their earnings back into their businesses before distributing year-end profits.
Conservation Impact

Despite international recognition, many World Heritage sites face uncertain futures. Destructive extractive practices including over fishing and deforestation, uncontrolled development, pollution, lack of enforcement, and many other factors of varying scales - mainly anthropogenic in nature - threaten their biodiversity and long-term viability. No where are these types of threats more apparent than in the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, which was added to the growing list of “World Heritage Sites in Danger” in 1996. Rio Plátano received another inauspicious recognition when it was included as a “Place to Watch” in the 2007 Live Earth Global Warming Survival Handbook, which selected ten of the most critical “front line” sites engaged in the battle against global warming.

The magnitude and nature of these threats demands innovative solutions. Fortunately, World Heritage sites provide an ideal laboratory to explore different methods, strategies and tools for achieving conservation in different ecological, economic, social, and political contexts. The formation of La Ruta Moskitia was one such experiment - an attempt to create stronger linkages between ecotourism revenue generation, job creation, and direct conservation impact.

Emerging from this experiment are a number of economic-based conservation strategies that Rare is pursuing in Rio Plátano, as well as other sites around the world. The following is a summary of how those strategies are being applied in Honduras, as well as some of their initial results.

Conservation Strategy I: Direct Financing

In which an enterprise creates a long-term, dedicated local source of funding for conservation activities where it would not exist otherwise.

An analysis of the conservation threats to the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve in 2002 revealed that one of primary challenges for the Reserve’s management was the lack of local community involvement in conservation activities. The problem was amplified by the fact that the Reserve has neither the infrastructure nor the staff to effectively collect entrance fees from visitors, and no money dedicated to engaging local communities in their limited annual budget.
With these challenges in mind, on January 1st 2007 the Alliance launched the La Ruta Moskitia “Conservation Fund”. The Fund is supported by 10% of all La Ruta Moskitia gross tour sales, and generated nearly $7,500 US in 2007. It is projected that the Conservation Fund will contribute more than $50,000 US over the next four years.

Money from the Fund, in addition other financial contributions raised by La Ruta Moskitia from institutional and foundation donors, is dedicated entirely to financing local conservation initiatives in the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve. Examples of these projects include the construction of Jabiru (the America’s largest bird, critically endangered) nesting sites in the Pine Savanna, mangrove reforestation efforts, and municipal solid waste management programs.

Coordinating these various community conservation projects is the responsibility of La Ruta Moskitia’s “Conservation Manager”, a full time management position whose salary is paid via the money generated by the Conservation Fund.

In addition to the 10% conservation fee collected on all tour sales, La Ruta Moskitia will also begin soliciting direct donations from clients in 2008 to support local conservation activities this year. Critical to this process are the local naturalist guides, who will begin interpretive messages about the community conservation projects into their tours, a step that will ideally increase client interest in contributing directly to those projects.

**Conservation Strategy II: Constituency Building**

In which an enterprise increases the number of local community members directly linked to conservation and environmental activism over an extended period of time.

In the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, the livelihoods of approximately 250 La Ruta Moskitia employees (and their 1500 family members) are directly linked to ecotourism and its inherent dependence on the protection of the Reserve’s natural & cultural resources. These employees are now beginning to defend their sustainable livelihoods by forming community “Conservation Corps” that engage their neighbors in the La Ruta Moskitia-funded conservation projects described above.

These groups of community environmental activists will also serve as volunteers in the Rare Pride environmental awareness-building campaign that will take place in the Reserve in 2008. Rare Pride is a year-long social marketing campaign that will feature the Great Green Macaw as Rio Plátano’s “flagship species” to promote conservation and increase environmental awareness in the region.
It is anticipated that these volunteers will continue environmental awareness-building efforts in La Moskitia once the initial campaign is complete with financial support from the Conservation Fund. As La Ruta Moskitia’s business continues to grow over the coming years, so will this army of dedicated environmental activists.

**Conservation Strategy III: Income Diversification**

In which an enterprise creates jobs for local communities members that are dependent upon resource preservation, thus reducing the level at which those community member are engaged in resource extraction.

In the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve, the average *annual* income for local residents is US $500, typically derived from unsustainable agriculture, hunting, over fishing, or some other extractive use of the Reserve’s natural resources.

A central goal of the La Ruta Moskitia project has been to increase the number of local residents who derive all or a portion of their income from ecotourism, which is inherently dependent upon resource preservation rather than extraction.

Each La Ruta Moskitia community consists of an “Ecotourism Group” that works together to manage their enterprise and collectively make business decisions. In addition to the daily salaries that members earn in their various roles (such as guides, cooks, and accountants) the members also share a percentage of their enterprise’s year-end profits.

La Ruta Moskitia has set the target annual income of its members to be higher than the $500 they would earn from resource extraction. And in nearly every community, these goals are being met. For example in 2007, members of the Brus Laguna community earned on average US $266 per person in salaries during the year. At the end of the year, after subtracting operating costs and reinvesting 30% of profits back into the enterprise, Brus Laguna also distributed on average US $296 in year-end profits to its members – for a total average income of US $562 per member.

Based upon five-year income projections, La Ruta Moskitia staff will increasingly be able make more money working in ecotourism than resource extraction. The example below is taken from the Raista Ecotourism Group business plan that illustrates how members are projected (and are currently on track) to earning more from ecotourism than any other local economic alternative. The result of this may be a considerable shift in the number of people involved with resource extraction, greatly lessening the pressure on the Reserve’s natural resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NET PROFIT AFTER TAXES</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$8,024</td>
<td>$10,102</td>
<td>$14,800</td>
<td>$20,706</td>
<td>$28,088</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NET PROFIT MARGIN</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAISTA ECOTOURISM GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Annual Profit per Member $535 $673 $987 $1,380 $1,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Monthly Profit per Member $45 $56 $82 $115 $156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conservation Strategy IV: Monitoring & Enforcement

In which an enterprise increases the number of trained guides and enterprise clients who are present in critical natural areas threatened by illegal land-use activities such as poaching, illegal logging, and illegal hunting/fishing.

For years, guides from the La Ruta Moskitia community of Raista had brought clients to the nearby Paru Creek watershed to seek out Mantled Howler Monkeys and Blue Morpho Butterflies. Recently, the invasion of illegal cattle ranching in the watershed has led to clear-cutting and habitat loss...and with only two park guards to patrol the 2 million square mile Reserve, enforcement is non-existent. Raista is now working with protected areas managers to designate the watershed as an “ecotourism special use zone” that would give the community co-management rights and responsibilities, and the same guides are now being trained in monitoring and reporting illegal land use activities.

Similar “special use zones” are also being explored in the La Ruta Moskitia community of Brus Laguna to protect a watershed that acts as a nursery for American Crocodiles & Brown Caiman, as well as a parcel of Great Pine Savannah where a rare pair of breeding Jabiru (the America’s largest flying bird) winters each year.

Cultural Preservation

One of the greatest threats to both cultural preservation and biodiversity protection in the Reserve is the unrelenting and illegal invasion of non-indigenous farmers and colonists into the protected area. The advancing agricultural frontier on the southern and western edges of the Reserve, pushed by illegal loggers and cattle ranchers, is severely reducing the Reserve’s forest area. With these illegal intruders also comes the influence of non-indigenous culture, language, and customs.

One of the ways in which La Ruta Moskitia is combating this cultural loss is through the formation of Miskito cultural groups in each community. Made up primarily of elder women, the groups present an evening of indigenous dance and music to captivated clients.

What is phenomenal about these cultural evenings is that as soon as the first note is played in the outdoor dining area where presentations take place, small children from around the communities come running out of their homes to sit amongst the visitors to listen to the rhythm and words of the songs which tell stories they had never heard in their own language. Language is the
backbone of culture, and these evening presentations have become a favorite experience not only for clients, but also for the local communities. They have become a tool of cultural preservation.

Additional steps that the La Ruta Moskitia has taken includes a website and pre-departure materials that educate clients about the importance of cultural sensitivity while a visitor in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. This material provides cultural guidelines for photographing local people, tipping, avoiding the support of child labor, and conveying the reserved and spiritual nature of the indigenous people of the Reserve.

Finally, the greatest achievement of the La Ruta Moskitia project in terms of cultural preservation has been the empowerment and training of indigenous leadership and management, and the involvement of local community members in every step of the Alliance’s development. Indigenous community members and leaders have defined the social parameters for local tourism development throughout the project’s participatory planning process, and by doing so have greatly mitigated negative community and cultural impacts.

**Promotion of Best Practices**

La Ruta Moskitia has made efforts to communicate its guiding ecotourism and business principles to numerous stakeholders, both inside the Reserve and out.

At the local level, enterprise managers have witnessed a considerable increase in the interest of local governmental and business leaders in the economic potential of “green” businesses in the Reserve. La Ruta Moskitia’s success as an ecotourism venture has encouraged other business leaders to explore economic alternatives such as agro forestry and organic fertilizers.

Nationally, La Ruta Moskitia has made efforts to communicate its financial support of conservation initiatives in the Reserve to other tour operators, in an effort to encourage them to do the same. The enterprise has also been clear with other tour operators about the rates paid to local staff in an effort to encourage them to raise their salaries to a level considered is necessary to see a shift in the local population’s economic activities from resource extraction to ecotourism.

**Awards & Recognition**

La Ruta Moskitia’s best practices have also been recognized and promoted via its selection to *Condé Nast Traveler*’s “Green List” in 2006 for contributions to local communities and conservation.

La Ruta Moskitia competed against 1700 other nominees to be named the 2007 *Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Award* “Best in Park or Protected Area” for its job creation in the Río
Plátano Biosphere Reserve and for establishing an alliance that packaged complementary experiences and avoided internal competition amongst the communities.

In 2008, the Alliance was awarded the highly coveted World Tourism & Travel Council (WTTC) *Tourism for Tomorrow* award in the “Investor in People” category. Considered by many to be the biggest accolade in the sustainable tourism field, the WTTC is made up of 100 of the biggest travel and tourism companies in the world. La Ruta Moskitia competed against highly successful applicants from seven continents to win the award.

In addition to the awards it has received, La Ruta Moskitia was recently selected as one of *National Geographic Adventure’s* “Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth”.

La Ruta Moskitia’s web site has also been recognized for excellence, winning the “*Arroba de Oro*” award (the “Golden @”) in 2006 for the best overall tourism website in all of Honduras.

**MONITORING & EVALUATION**

Measuring the social, economic, and environmental impact of community-based ecotourism in the Rio Plátano Biosphere Reserve is a fundamental way to evaluate and quantify La Ruta Moskitia’s lessons learned and best practices, as well as gauge overall business performance.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the enterprise, La Ruta Moskitia applies a “Balanced Scorecard” at monthly, quarterly, and annual intervals to track a variety of indicators. Community development indicators include jobs created and changes in annual staff incomes. Sales & marketing indicators include profit margins and revenue changes from the year prior as well as market share. Visitor satisfaction indicators are tracked by post-trip surveys given to clients who rank La Ruta Moskitia’s food, guide, lodging, and transportation services.

For example, the Balance Scorecard includes community economic indicators such as the amount of local salaries paid each month, as well as the overall number of work days created by tourism operations. La Ruta Moskitia’s goal for both indicators is a 5-10% increase over the same month the prior year, and the enterprise has exceeded those goals with a 15-20% increase each month this past year.

Client testimonials drawn from the client feedback survey, as well as from guest comment books located at each La Ruta Moskitia destination, have been an excellent tool not only for improving the Alliance’s products and services, but also for marketing and promotion. The Alliance’s website has an entire page dedicated to featuring positive feedback from actual clients. The appendix of this case study also contains some of that feedback.
THE LA RUTA MOSKITIA CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION

During the second successful year of La Ruta Moskitia’s tourism operations, it became apparent that both the growth of the enterprise, as well the increasing involvement of La Ruta Moskitia in conservation initiatives in the Reserve, required a legal structure that allowed it to do both types of work.

Therefore in 2007, with financial and technical support from both Rare and GEF/UNDP, La Ruta Moskitia submitted the legal documentation needed to form the first indigenous conservation non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Reserve. This newly established organization is governed by a Board of Directors made up of one indigenous member from each of the La Ruta Moskitia destinations, and is lead by Executive Director Elmor Wood. Mr. Wood is a Miskito Indian who has worked with community development and conservation issues in La Moskitia for nearly 20 years, holds a masters degree from the University of Kansas, and was integral in the formation of La Ruta Moskitia in his role as Rare’s local project manager.

The mission of the new conservation NGO is to expand the economic opportunities of community-based ecotourism to additional communities, create local conservation strategies that can be supported from tourism revenues, build a productive partnership between indigenous communities and the Reserve’s managers, and revitalize the indigenous values and knowledge that help local populations to use Reserve land in a sustainable way.

The benefits of La Ruta Moskitia’s NGO status to both tourism operations and conservation initiatives, as well as the synergistic linkages between the two, are numerous.

From a tourism perspective, the La Ruta Moskitia NGO (and the community conservation projects it coordinates) provides excellent opportunities for tour clients to learn about conservation threats in the Reserve, and to experience first-hand local projects directed at addressing those threats. Whether it is building Jabiru nesting sites or participating in a community recycling campaign, clients walk away with a better understanding of the environmental challenges that La Moskitia is facing. Based upon this deeper appreciation (which is highly dependent upon how the experience is interpreted by local guides) the likelihood that a La Ruta Moskitia client will make a financial donation supporting these conservation efforts is exponentially increased. The conservation projects make the “eco” part of ecotourism very real and tangible.

From a conservation perspective, although 10% of La Ruta Moskitia’s gross tour sales are dedicated to conservation, the NGO status gives the organization access to national and international funding agencies who support biodiversity protection and poverty alleviation efforts. La Ruta Moskitia’s legal NGO status is especially significant given the preference of many of these agencies in directly funding local organizations, rather than channeling those funds through international organizations.
Finally, the La Ruta Moskitia NGO allows the organization to share certain resources required both for its tourism operations and conservation initiatives, including an Executive Director, office space, and equipment, and training facilities.
TEN KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1. **CAPITALIZATION & KEY PARTNERSHIPS**

Access to start-up capital is one of the greatest challenges most community-based ecotourism projects face, including the La Ruta Moskitia project. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were budgeted for technical staff, travel, training programs, and project administration within the project, yet not a single dollar was budgeted for investment in the start up costs of the enterprises.

The reason for this was in part because the specific capitalization needs of the enterprises in Honduras were unknown when budgets were developed prior to the project’s initiation. But another reason is simply because Rare’s core capacities are training, participatory planning, and community-based conservation strategies – it is not a funding or lending institution. Therefore, a major key to the success of the La Ruta Moskitia project was collaboration with key partners, particularly in the area of capitalization.

GEF/UNDP’s financial investment in the communities of La Ruta Moskitia was both critical and complimentary to the overall success of the project. The GEF/UNDP Small Grants Program (SGP) is a global funding program that has contributed more than US $150 million over the last fifteen years to a variety of poverty alleviation and biodiversity protection projects, yet in Honduras does not provide a great deal of enterprise development training or technical support with those funds.

La Ruta Moskitia of course would not exist at all without the sweat equity and “buy in” of the project’s most important partner...the communities themselves. It is cliché to highlight the importance of transparency, participatory planning, and empowerment when discussing community-based projects, but without them La Ruta Moskitia would never have come to fruition. Finally, the trend of many funding agencies’ preference in supporting local NGO’s and CBO’s directly (vs. funneling the funds through international organizations) demands that the development community become more effective in engaging local organizations.

2. **CONTROL FIXED SALARIES...BUILD IN INCENTIVES AT ALL LEVELS**

A mistake that many fledgling community-based enterprises make is committing to multiple fixed-salaries for staff, particularly to managerial-level positions, regardless of enterprise performance. Such a financial commitment can quickly over-extend a new tourism business.

Aside from the Executive Director position, every other salary within La Ruta Moskitia is a variable cost, and dependent upon the volume of daily/monthly sales that the Alliance generates.
Sales, Operations, and General Managers all make a percentage of tour sales, and staff members (boat drivers, cooks, etc.) make a set daily wage when their services are needed. This system ensures the enterprises are not losing money during low/shoulder seasons (as tourism is a seasonal industry), and also provides incentive at every level for managers to maximize tour sales through “up-selling” and by encouraging them to provide the best possible customer service (which results in increased sales via word-of-mouth promotion).

3. **CONTROL FIXED OPERATING COSTS**

La Ruta Moskitia manages more than $100K in annual gross tour sales through a single Sales Manager who works out of a home office in the north coast city of La Ceiba, Honduras. The Sales Manager requires only a computer, an internet connection, and a phone line to do his job. This “virtual” store-front reduces costly commercial rental space, utilities, and other associated operating costs. Clients are met either at their hotels or at a well-known local restaurant for their pre-trip departure briefing.

With that said, some community-based enterprises do require an actual store-front/office, which typically provides potential clients a sense of confidence in the business. Clients who do request to stop by La Ruta Moskitia’s offices (most likely to ensure its credibility) are welcomed into the Sales Manager’s home office. But only a fraction of clients request this, based primarily on the strength of past client recommendations, the comprehensive website, and the recognition La Ruta Moskitia has received from numerous reputable sources.

4. **CUSTOMER SERVICE & WORD OF MOUTH PROMOTION**

Although not included in the description of sales and marketing mechanisms earlier in this document, “word-of-mouth” promotion has been the single greatest reason for La Ruta Moskitia’s strong tour sales. This is mainly the result of the provision of good customer service that many competitors simply lack. Client inquiries are answered within a day of being received, extensive trip information is captured in pre-departure briefings and info packs, and during tours community members put great effort into ensuring client experiences are authentic and pleasurable.

5. **IT’S ALL ABOUT THE WEBSITE**

The Alliance’s website is usually the first and most important contact that most potential clients have with La Ruta Moskitia. The site was designed to not only be eye-catching and informative, but to also convey the professionalism and quality of the community-based tourism products the Alliance offers. This is particularly important when considering that within seconds of opening a website, most clients determine if a company is reputable or not, especially one that has the word “community-based” attached to it. Therefore, the [www.larutamoskitia.com](http://www.larutamoskitia.com) homepage offers client testimonials, a showcase of the Alliance’s awards, and links to well-known publications that have featured and endorsed La Ruta Moskitia.
6. **LET CLIENTS KNOW THEY ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE!**

All of La Ruta Moskitia’s communication materials – from the website to email/phone correspondence to the tours themselves – incorporate messages of the positive impact that clients (and their tour payments) have on the communities and conservation of La Moskitia. World travelers are becoming more and more educated about the difference between authentic sustainable tourism companies and those that simply “green wash”, and the La Ruta Moskitia is an example of the differentiation and added value that real community and conservation supports gives to a tour product. Nearly every client-submitted web posting, testimonial, and/or recommendation of La Ruta Moskitia contains some reference to these community development or conservation benefits, and these philanthropic benefits have most certainly been a major contributor the Alliance’s success.

7. **COMMUNITY INVESTMENT IS ESSENTIAL**

The participating communities of La Ruta Moskitia were not handed a ready-to-go tourism operation, but rather worked for years in order to launch and grow the Alliance. Small business managers, guides, and staff members spent months away from friends and family in training programs for which they received no financial compensation. Enterprise group members worked day after day collecting construction materials from nearby forests and building lodging and dining facilities. Countless hours were spent in enterprise group meetings discussing profit sharing strategies, conservation projects, and day-to-day operational challenges.

This process acted as a filter that resulted in enterprise groups that were much larger to begin with…30-40 members on average. As the challenges of starting a new business grew, the number of members shrank. Just prior to enterprise launch in 2005, the groups were few as 5-10 members in some communities. But, as tourism sales began to increase, so did local interest in becoming involved with the enterprises. This phenomenon demanded that the enterprise groups determine internal bylaws that defined how and when new members could become involved, and how founding members who had invested more in the business received more compensation with the profit sharing strategy.
8. **EVERY BUSINESS NEEDS A STRONG LEADER**

During the years leading up to the enterprise launch, these peaks and valleys in group involvement and membership were evident in nearly every La Ruta Moskitia enterprise. But in nearly every enterprise, one or two leaders also emerged as the driving force to keep their community’s project moving forward. Within La Ruta Moskitia, these individuals were the graduates of the ecotourism Promoters course, who would eventually become General Managers of each enterprise. Whether it was their investment in the project/training, their desire to complete something they had started, their potential personal gain, or some other reason all together...without them their individual enterprises would have most likely failed.

In fact, La Ruta Moskitia Alliance began with six member communities. The sixth community, like the others, was led by a Promoters graduate in the development of their community enterprises. But the Promoter graduate moved to a larger city to pursue other career opportunities, as is often the case in rural areas, and even with all of the financial and technical support provided by Rare and GEF/UNDP, the group eventually fragmented and faded.

9. **PROFITABILITY FIRST...CONSERVATION SECOND**

Enterprise profitability has to be achieved before any other community or conservation benefit can be realized. Without successful tour sales, revenue generation, and job creation...none of these other project objectives such as the direct financing of conservation initiatives or the shift in local economies from resource extraction to preservation are possible. For this reason, the collection of the 10% conservation tax did not start until year two of operations, and the initiation of projects supported by that fund and La Ruta Moskitia staff did not begin until year three. With that said, the communities’ understanding of and commitment to supporting conservation efforts through their enterprises needs to communicated and established from day one.

10. **RESEARCH & IMPART VISITOR EXPECTATIONS**

Defining visitor expectations, and then training local communities to meet those expectations, was a key role for Rare technical staff in the La Ruta Moskitia project. Researching these expectations has been an ongoing process that began with the application of visitor surveys at major tourism destinations in Honduras prior to the Alliance’s launch and continues with client feedback surveys that are collected after every La Ruta Moskitia tour. Survey results have assisted in lodging (preference of lanterns/candles to artificial light) to food (fresh fruit at every meal) to transportation (boat drivers need to stop for all wildlife sightings).