

Community Comment
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Sam Pennisi

A Costa Rican Education

Recently I had the opportunity to travel on business to Costa Rica. This is a country just to the North of Panama in Central America. I have not had the pleasure of visiting this country or region before so I was pretty ignorant of what to expect. The business part of this trip was to explore the possibility of a Rotary International project.

Rotary is the oldest service club and each club explores the possibility of local community service projects as well as international projects each year. The Arcata Club has been fortunate enough to have a member that has a science observatory contact in the highlands of Costa Rica. Over a period of years, he has established personal relationships with other scientists in the country and one young man has visited Arcata often as a result. He is from the highland area, with elevations ranging from 7000 to over 9000 feet. The highlands, where he was born and raised, remains an impoverished region by simple geography. This area is remote and sparsely populated. The environment is mostly rain and cloud forest. Our young friend described the two seasons that they enjoy as the rainy season and the rainier season. There is some cattle and dairy farming but most jobs that can be found are basic labor and don't pay much. Most of the residents have been there for generations and their life conditions haven't changed much over time.

As part of our visit, we met with the community. A general invitation was circulated by word of mouth and we were hoping to meet from four to ten people. We wanted to explain why we were there and that we wanted to see if we could be of help and we wanted to listen to their stories and needs and their outlook for their children. On a Friday morning, fifty people showed up to talk with us. They walked from as little as a mile or so to over five. They were mostly women. Those that were married told us their husbands were at work at jobs that don't provide for their needs. Many had children and brought the younger ones with them. The reason they came to meet with complete strangers was simple. They want to work. They want to live in their beautiful area. They don't need much to change their lives for the better. They don't want things or projects or even money; they know what they need is help. They need help in the form of ideas and training. It became clear to me that this would be no ordinary Rotary project. These people want a relationship with people who can help them help themselves.

We also met with a Rotary Club from the Capital City of San Jose. They, too, want to partner with a Club like ours to help a forgotten region of their own country.

Those of us who traveled to this amazing Rain Forest were struck by a few things; Humboldt County and this area of the highlands had much in common. We share an incredibly beautiful and important environment. We both have strong and active

communities. We both are interested in making the preservation of a forest environment work to support each community and to sustain enriching and rewording lives for generations to come. These are not issues that are simple to resolve.

Perhaps by reaching out to this mountain region of Costa Rica, we may discover solutions to some of our own issues. I think the four of us who made this trip are excited by the possibilities. We will share our progress as this partnership develops.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment