

Weekend

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Comfort and conservation on the high seas.

W-7

One of a Kind: Endangered Monkeys Get Support

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IN the palm plantations, rice paddies and cattle farms of Quepos on the Central Pacific coast, the Naranjo river laps at its eroded banks and sweeps square meters of soil into the sea.

Once, a forest extended from the Pacific beaches to the Cerro Nara, roughly 25 km along this river, and confined the water's moods to the channels reinforced by the forest's roots. The *mono tití*, the Costa Rican squirrel monkey, thrived here in a number reaching the hundreds of thousands, and wandered with impunity between what is now Manuel Antonio National Park and the protected land on the other side of the plain.

These embattled monkeys are unique to the Pacific coast of Costa Rica and are now on the brink of extinction, partly because of their own good looks, and partly because of the popularity of the forest and broad beaches where they live.

The Association for the Conservation of the Mono Tití (ASCOMOTI), under the direction of Matthew Cook, is working to reverse the negative evolutionary trend. If the endorsement of the Jane Goodall Institute and the 2003 Ford Motor Company Conservation and Environment Grant for its work to protect the monkey are any indication, it's making progress.

IN the effort to preserve the monkey, ASCOMOTI has planted more than 13,000 trees along an eight-km stretch of the Naranjo, and plans to plant 20,000, in total, that will link the privately owned banks of the river to the two protected areas in one forested corridor.

Thousands of saplings now line the river, planted by school children, university students, volunteers and workers for the association. As the trees grow, they will rein in the current and provide the monkeys a passage of fruit trees between

the isolated forests.

ASCOMOTI isn't just taking on the vegetation; it has also spurred cooperation among tourism businesses in Manuel Antonio and land owners along the river.

"The area is being bombarded by developers who have different visions," Cook said. "Some think you can keep building and building and people will come, others think you have to be smart for it to maintain its preeminence as an ecotourist destination."

TOURISTS, both national and international, visit Manuel Antonio in greater numbers than any other park in the country. The hotels, resorts, restaurants, shops and roads built to make visits comfortable encroach on the land of the very animals tourists go to see. East of the park, along the Naranjo, agriculture has robbed the monkeys of the trees they need to sustain themselves and has divided the protected lands.

The monkeys now flounder in isolated groups and their numbers have dwindled from around 200,000 in 1983, according to a study by University of Florida researcher Sue Boinsky, to an estimated 4,000 today. That number may be divided between two arguably distinct kinds of monkey, one subspecies numbering around 2,500, the other around 1,500.

Through ASCOMOTI, Cook puts pressure on the Costa Rican government to enforce development codes in those protected areas (www.ascomoti.org/investorinfo). The association publishes a pamphlet, in English and Spanish, for investors that clarifies the state's development and environmental policies.

"**CONFUSION** of law interpretation confounds development policy," Cook said. "It's frustrating for developers and can lead to corruption."

Some developers give up on the legal process and resort to bribes, he said, simply because they were misinformed from the beginning.

A shifting roster of local businesses and home owners, now numbering 19, pay monthly dues to ASCOMOTI of \$50 to \$600, depending on their size, to propel its work to protect the monkey and, by extension, the forest and fauna. The association spreads the funds among several projects, including rope bridges strung between trees over the highway to reduce the number of monkeys killed by cars and electrocution from uninsulated power lines, and the rental of land from local farmers along the Naranjo.

RANDALL Cruz, manager of one of the association's member hotels, El Parador, said the results of some of the projects are not immediately apparent, but the long term effect is immeasurable.

"The best way to preserve the monkey is through the natural corridors, a project

that will take time to implement and will show results in the long run," he said.

Of the hotel's involvement, he said "it's not a marketing plan to protect the monkey, that comes after. If you preserve the area, you can keep offering it to visitors."

Cook would like to see the ASCOMOTI name and logo become a brand, of sorts, or a mark of quality that member businesses will display and tourists will seek when they choose from among the competition for their money.

"It's a perfect opportunity to have tourists finance biodiversity," he said. "Tourists would pay a little more to a business that preserves the environment."

The current members do not raise their prices to pay their dues, instead they pay "from their bottom lines" Cook said.

Cook views the association as a mechanism through which tourism protects land.

"Who can pay a farmer to leave the forest alone?" he asked. "The tourists who want to see the forest."

THE association's reforestation efforts have gathered helping hands from across the country. Students of the Universidad Nacional in Heredia use aerial photographs to digitally map the territory. ASCOMOTI members and volunteers stake out the area they would like to reforest using Global Positioning System devices. They negotiate with those who own the land, paying them a monthly rent for its use, then volunteers and members of the association plant trees of species native to the area along the banks.

Children of the school of Londres planted approximately 400 trees in one day as part of a two-day educational field trip. They learned about wild animals and the problems associated with hunting and keeping exotic animals as pets. Later some formed a club, called the *Defensores del Mono Tití*, which plans to raise money from the community to build a greenhouse for trees.

RODOLFO Jiménez, director of the school, said he saw a change in the attitudes of the children after their trip.

"It raised the consciousness of the children and gave them respect for the animals," he said. "They don't keep wild animals as pets anymore."

Jessie Rodríguez, a 12-year-old member of the Mono Tití club, said one of the things he learned on the trip, he said, is that "an animal cannot be locked inside, it belongs in the forest."

The Friends of ASCOMOTI sister organization, based in the United States, makes donating to the association tax deductible for U.S. residents.

For more info, including a list of member businesses, how to make a donation and volunteer opportunities, contact (506) 224-5703, e-mail monotiti@racsa.co.cr or see www.ascomoti.org



Courtesy Sergio Cota

HANGIN' IN THERE:
Using multiple approaches, ASCOMOTI is working on protecting the *mono tití*.

INSIDE

* **DIVING REPORT**

W-3

* **OLD-SCHOOL
CHILDBIRTH**

W-5

* **OUT ON THE TOWN**

W-8

* **RECYCLING
PLASTICS**

W-12