

Laguna del Lagarto Lodge Owner Makes Positive Impact

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Laguna del Lagarto Lodge's contribution to its Northern Zone community is an example of how ecotourism can affect the well-being and lifestyle of the inhabitants of an isolated area.

When German international banker and financial consultant Vinzenz Schmack came to Costa Rica in 1974, he never imagined he would end up as the owner of a jungle lodge.

This "crazy German," as the locals called him when he first arrived, opened Laguna del Lagarto Lodge in 1992. Since then, he has made a huge impact on the small, isolated community of Boca Tapada and the surrounding area.

When Schmack bought the property, the public electricity line ended 10 miles away. After substantial lobbying, the community, together with the lodge, had its dream come true in 1994. Schmack paid for the final mile of line to the lodge, and received a plaque of recognition from the village for his determination and financial contributions.

The same was repeated with the telephone line that was finally connected to the lodge in 1999. Santa Rita, only a mile away, never received a connection, and the lodge telephone still serves the inhabitants of this tiny hamlet.

Santa Rita has its own water supply, to which the lodge is connected, but Schmack contributes constantly to its maintenance and was instrumental in getting a grant from the German Embassy in 2004 to build a reserve tank. Maintenance of the 19-mile stretch of gravel road from Pital to Boca Tapada is a never-ending problem, so the lodge's generous annual contribution helps all who live along this bumpy stretch.

Apart from assisting with area infrastructure, the lodge has generated employment and education for area residents and has been responsible for many suc-



Photo courtesy of Laguna del Lagarto Lodge

Vinzenz Schmack

cess stories. A local's primitive dugout boat was used for the trip up the Rio San Carlos, though it was totally inadequate. Thanks to a loan from Schmack, the captain purchased a covered fiberglass boat and now runs a prosperous business transporting not only lodge guests but also his own clientele.

In Boca San Carlos, the restaurant's main source of income is from those who take the boat trip. The owner of the restaurant in Boca Tapada sold his business and bought a minibus. He now makes a much better living transporting lodge guests to and from La Fortuna.

The lodge employs eight people, including six from local communities, three of whom are women. In an area where unemployment is a household word, Schmack and his son Kurt not only have been responsible for improving the livelihood of area residents, but have also assisted some to achieve previously unthought-of opportunities.

The cook, Adolfo González, an odd-job Nicaraguan refugee, by sheer coincidence discovered his talent for cooking. This resulted in some German guests offering him a fully paid trip to Germany to teach Costa Rican cuisine.

Oscar Artavia, a farm worker, was trained as a guide and sent to San José to learn English, and, through Schmack's Rotary connections, spent time living with a family in the United States. Later, a visiting tour operator from a canoeing company invited him to Vermont to work as a guide. Subsequently, he returned to Costa Rica and now has his own canoeing company in La Fortuna.

His brother Fauricio was given similar training and now works with Oscar. The lodge continues to train local people, but Schmack appears to hold no resentment when they leave and is proud and delighted to have been able to give them such opportunities.

Through his connections with the Rotary Club of San José, Schmack has been instrumental in bringing Rotary Club members from the United States to do a variety of social projects in the area, including a three-day free dental clinic and donations of medical supplies to be distributed to clinics in the Northern Zone.

Assistance to local schools is ongoing, including construction and refurbishing projects, as well as school supplies and two computers that were donated by the Rotary Club of San José to the school in Boca Tapada. While staying at the lodge, YMCA students have donated their time and supplies toward improvements in the community.

The Schmacks have gained full respect from local communities, and the positive impact of their small lodge, run under strict ecological guidelines, is a commendable example of how ecotourism can benefit the population of a remote area.

—Ann Antkiw