

Rancho Mastatal Updates

July 2002

Things are finally starting to slow down here at the Ranch after a busy and active summer, or winter as they refer to the rainy season down here. Our volunteer program kicked into high gear these past few months, and our educational programs are getting solidified with a handful of tentatively confirmed school groups for the upcoming year. Carol Alette and Jim Fraser broke the ice a few months back with respect to homestays, and since then, many visitors have taken advantage of the opportunity to spend part of their time here in Mastatal with local families, most hoping to work on their Spanish, and to see first hand how the local families live. It has without exception been a positive experience for all of those that have taken part in this option.

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The magic of the everyday at Mastatal - a rainforest leaf

photo by Aaron Drury

RM Program News: Wilderness First Responder

We are hosting a Wilderness First Responder Certification Course in November and are working on a number of other workshops for next year, including yoga, alternative building, and micro-hydro installation. Let us know if you have other workshop ideas for us. Our first composting toilet is officially in use, the earth oven is cranking out the breads and pizzas, and the new back porch, using bamboo construction, is in full use. The gardens continue to pump out the greens, tomatoes, pepper, cucumbers and more, and we are currently harvesting our first crop of *frijoles* and corn. Fresh black bean soup, tortillas, and corn on the cob have dominated the dinner table the last few weeks, along with other incredible culinary delights. Dan and Jen Alcorn, two of the owners of Rancho Mastatal and currently teachers in AK, recently spent six weeks here with their one-year-old daughter, Hannah, as they gear up for their eventual move to the Tropics. They are continuing to make preparations to bring down school groups from the Great White North next year. Dan, and two of our much-loved volunteers, Gabe Headley and Brian Winslett, were instrumental in getting the composting toilet, or The Bank as we fondly call it, built and prepared for receiving deposits. Robin had a plethora of help in getting the earth oven designed and built, including incredible support from Robyn Craig, Liz Sanner, Clayton and Sharon Beaudoin, Dee Durek, and countless others. Robin became excited about building the oven after helping Ben Graham build one in Vermont last summer at the Yestermorrow Design/Build School. Another wonderful enhancement to the front yard of the ranch is an altar designed by Myriam Hammani, initiated on the night of the summer solstice. Thanks also to Myriam for the beautiful trail map that she made for our trail system, and also to Rachel Adam and Lauren Cerre for doing the same for the trails at Jeanne's.



One of many wilderness first responder courses taught by Aerie Backcountry Medicine at the ranch

Conservation Update: Species List

Our species list continues to grow by leaps and bounds, as visitors to the Ranch do much needed cataloging and inventory. Thanks to Greg Mazer for taking the initiative to start the Wildlife Observation Book, and to Joni Reese, Eric Johnson, Tom McDonald and Angelita Costanzo for their contributions and improvements. Caryn and Richard, we now have both volumes of Phillip J. DeVries *The Butterflies of Costa Rica: And Their Natural History*, and are starting to inventory these beautiful creatures too. Time for another visit. You can keep posted up on our species list by visiting our website, found under the Ecology page and updated as often as possible. While you are at it, check out some of the new pictures and the new photo gallery. Kudos and thanks to DELFINO CORNALI for this awesome contribution. Mark Ely, a friend of ours in Seattle, was responsible for designing and building the site. We are super pleased with how it turned out.



A closeup of a green iguana - a living relic from our Cretaceous past



First outdoor communal dinner

photo by John "Buck" Banks

Building Report: The Back Porch

Two days ago, we started pouring an adobe floor that will be showcased as part of the new back porch area that we recently finished. Many of you out there were instrumental in getting this project to the point where we are now, the fun playing in the mud part. We hauled rocks from the river in what seemed like an endless series of trips to get the sub-floor ready to receive the mixture. Our rock man, Gabe Headley, Chepo and Junior, two local men from the community, and numerous others spearheaded this exhausting effort. The all-natural flooring is made of clay, a beautiful blue mud found locally, sand, sifted and hauled from the river, and a strong grass called “brizanta”, which is commonly planted in the pastures of the region to “improve” the meadow. The unfortunate result of this “improvement” is more decimated rainforest. My cousin Nancy Draina is part of the current team working on the floor project. We will keep you posted up on how this project progresses. Anyone coming down over the next month or two will be able to help out with its completion.

We would love to list all of the names of the people that have selflessly contributed their time and effort to make these first 8 months at Rancho Mastatal a truly special experience for everyone, but we won't in the interest of keeping this update to a reasonable length. We encourage those of you that have spent some time here to share your experiences in this forum, if you so desire. Thanks all.

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Jeanne's Place

One other interesting development taking place these days is our attempt to acquire another 88 acres of land across the street from where we presently live. The property, affectionately known as Jeanne's place, is up for sale. We have been using the property with permission from the present owner since our arrival last November. The property has a nice house, which has been used to house volunteers and groups, orchards full of mangoes, oranges, lemons, starfruit, bananas, platanos, rose apples, coconuts, peach palm, and more, and contains some beautiful primary and secondary forest, which backs up to a wonderful river called the Río Negro. We hope to bring this great place into the mix in an effort to further conserve the local forests, and if successful in financing the purchase, we will continue to utilize this property as our home for groups.



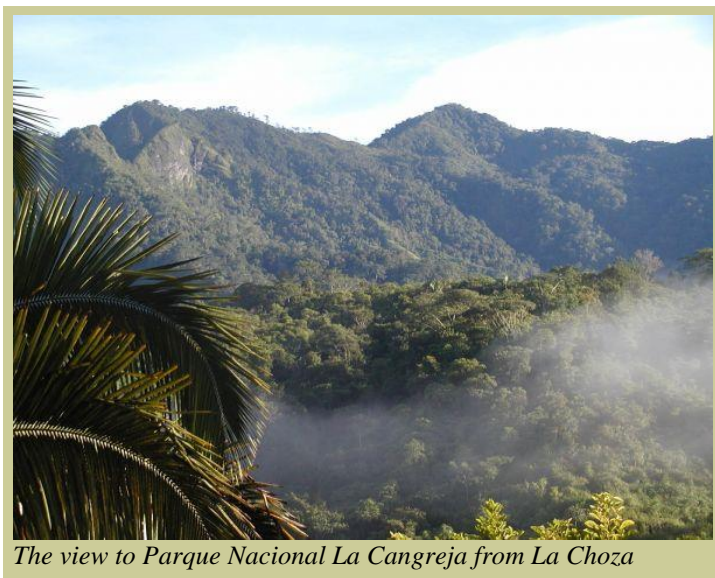
Our group house, Jeanne's

The weather has been fantastic since the rains started in earnest in May. In fact, it is pouring as I write this. We generally wake up to sunny skies that gradually give way to clouds, and finally to rain at some point in the afternoon. After the cooling rains, the sun again shows itself right before an often times beautiful sunset, and then proceeds to starry nights. Meteorologists have said that this year is again the year of the oceanic phenomenon “The Christ Child”, or “El Niño”, as we know it. As a result, we are to expect lighter than normal rains, though to date, the rivers are up and the aquifers are full. We are fortunate enough to have a large stand of forest in the area, which

locals and others believe brings more rainfall to this area compared to others in the region. While on the topic of rain, I should tell you that we have been playing around with our first water catchment system, using bamboo gutters, and a recycled 55-gallon drum. The gutter catches the runoff from the roof and drops it into the drum. Through a series of pipes, the water then makes its way down towards an outdoor spigot near the new composting toilet so that folks can wash up after doing their duty at The Bank. We hope to catch much more of our water in the future. This will be especially important during the drier months.

This past Sunday was a great day for everyone at the Ranch. As on most Sundays, we went to the local soccer game, which resulted in a great win for the Mastatal team and prolonged their winning streak, and then proceeded to the local pulperia and cantina where two local men, unplugged, got the place rolling with their accordion and guitar duo with a succession of “rancheros” and other traditional Costa Rican campo tunes. Tita, a current volunteer, then motivated everyone in the place to grab a partner and before we knew what had happened, the whole place was on their feet shaking and laughing. An experience that will undoubtedly be talked about for months to come here, and yet another magical Mastatal moment.

Chepo, Lily, Junior and Annia are all doing well, as are Doña Maria, Doña Flor and Don Tino and family, Juan Luis and family, Doña Blanca, Chilo and Arabela and family, Marcelo and Lusmilda and their gang and everyone else here in Mastatal. Lusmilda is a few months pregnant, and doing fine. The community has been active otherwise with a recent Bingo event to raise money for the school, and a number of weekend activities, often times centering around soccer games and food sales, to raise funds for various local organizations. Also in local news, the school, with the help of Rancho Mastatal volunteers, recently made their first garden bed, and in another effort, cleaned trash up from in front of houses and off of the roads to help beautify the town



The view to Parque Nacional La Cangreja from La Choza

Community Facts/Stories: National Park Status for La Cangreja

Some of the more significant news coming out of Mastatal over the past few months has to do with the surprising declaration of Costa Rican’s newest national park right in our backyard. The protected status of the former “Zona Protectora La Cangreja” was elevated to that of national park on June 5, 2002, Latin America’s Earth Day. The new park is now under the jurisdiction of the state, and will be staffed by park guards. This will hopefully result in the reduction of poaching and illegal timber harvesting in the region. The state is looking to enlarge the borders of the former

“zona protectora”. We do not yet know what this modification will mean for both the community and us. We are sure that some of the imminent changes will be positive, though we are realistic in thinking too that some of the results will be detrimental. Change in Latin America is generally slow, so we do not expect anything to happen overnight. Some people will surely have their land

expropriated by the Costa Rica government. Some of this land will be taken from poachers and practitioners of destructive agricultural practices, yet undoubtedly others more respectful of the environment may also find themselves looking for a new home. To date, the Ministry of the Environment and the Costa Rican government has been quite receptive, and vow that when they redefine the limits of the national park, they will do so in a participatory and inclusive manner. We are hopeful and fighting for this to be the case, as much of our property falls within the new-targeted borders. We have the Minister of the Environment's word that they we will not expropriate our land due to the fact that we are conservationists and contributing members of the community. By leaving us alone, they can save money by not having to buy our property, freeing up monies for them to buy more degraded and important properties in the area.

On a different yet related point, on April 4, a few months before the declaration of the new national park, we submitted the necessary paperwork to the Ministry of the Environment to place 93% of our property into a private reserve. With the recent developments, we are now taking an additional step by preparing to submit the paperwork to declare most or all of Rancho Mastatal a private wildlife refuge. This has many advantages, and is in alignment with our long-term goals. Our property will act as a buffer zone to the new national park, and will help preserve the regional flora and fauna, many species that are endangered and/or endemic to only this part of the world. This area is thought to have more botanical diversity than anywhere else in Costa Rica, one of the richest countries in the world in terms of biodiversity. Scientists estimate that Puriscal County, where we live, contains some 51% of the species of Costa Rica, compared to only 34% found in Corcovado National Park, the crown jewel of Costa Rica's national park system. The region is greatly understudied, and taxonomists are confident that in the coming years, they will be identifying many more important species, some perhaps found only in this part of the planet. A sad fact of the regional past is that 90% of Puriscal County has been deforested in the last half decade. Only 10% of the original forest remains, most of which is found in the national park and on Rancho Mastatal. It is more critical than ever to preserve this incredibly unique ecosystem, to work towards increasing habitat for the flora and fauna, and to protect the incredible watershed that provides water to many of the surrounding communities.

Chepo, Lily, Junior and Annia are all doing well, as are Doña Maria, Doña Flor and Don Tino and family, Juan Luis and family, Doña Blanca, Chilo and Arabela and family, Marcelo and Lusmilda and their gang and everyone else here in Mastatal. Lusmilda is a few months pregnant, and doing fine. The community has been active otherwise with a recent Bingo event to raise money for the school, and a number of weekend activities, often times centering around soccer games and food sales, to raise funds for various local organizations. Also in local news, the school, with the help of Rancho Mastatal volunteers, recently made their first garden bed, and in another effort, cleaned trash up from in front of houses and off of the roads to help beautify the town

On a down note, poaching, of both animals and hardwoods, continues to be a big problem in the area. We are working on getting this under control, and with the placement of park guards in the new national park, we are hoping that this will help ameliorate the problem. The community is also working to organize an Environmental Vigilance Committee to report all cases of abuses to the environment. If we are able to get enough people committed to this program, the Ministry of the Environment will send out an official to train members of the Committee to protect the

environment, and empower them to hand out fines to those caught poisoning the rivers, harvesting lumber illegal, and hunting. This volunteer warden program is called COVIRENAS, and has been successful in many parts of Costa Rica.

It is an exciting time to be in Mastatal. This small, rural village will be the centerpiece of some interesting developments over the next few decades. We hope that this relatively unknown area of Costa Rica is up to the task for what is to come. The people and nature are what make this area so special, as those of you that have been here well know. Even with the coming changes, we hope that Mastatal stays in most ways exactly the same.

Thanks to all of you helping us get the word out. It's amazing how many friends, friends of friends, family, and friends of family we have hosted to date. It really has been a magical experience for us so far, and we are anxiously looking forward to the upcoming years. Please continue to spread the news about what we are doing. To all of you teachers out there, please let us know if you are interested in bringing down a school group, and to everyone else, we hope to see you here again or for the first time in the not-too-distant future. *Saludos.*

Abrazos,

Tim, Robin, Dan and Jen