

# *Agroturismo*



*Mi trabajo con  
el Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura  
Costa Rica*

6 de junio-4 de agosto, 2003

*Por Lacie Hoskins*

***Acknowledgements:***

- I first need to thank Lisa Fleming, Dr. Norman Borlaug and The World Food Prize Foundation, John Ruan, and Kenneth Quinn for all their hard work with the interns. Without them, our internships would not provide the amazing experiences to Iowa's youth that they do.
- Thank you to my host family in Costa Rica for all they provided me with. My internship would not have been as memorable without everything they did for me.
- Thanks to Kay McClanahan, my supervisor and IICA lawyer and Federico Sancho, project coordinator in the Costa Rica office of IICA. None of my research would have been possible without their help and commitment to me.
- Finally, I thank all other IICA staff that helped make my internship with them possible and as successful as it was.

THANK YOU!!

My name is Lacie Hoskins, and I am a senior at Independence High School in Independence, Iowa. I attended the Youth Institute as a junior in 2002. I first learned about the World Food Prize from a friend who had attended the Youth Institute and received an internship in Thailand. We talked about it and I became very interested, so I decided to try it. First, to be considered for participation I had to write a paper for my mentor. I was then chosen as the participating student from my school, and I started working on the Youth Institute paper right away.

At the Youth Institute, I was able to meet people I would have never dreamed of meeting. There were huge numbers of men and women there, and all for one cause in the end. Alleviating world hunger. Knowing that such a significant number of people dedicate their lives to the betterment of others' lives really made me believe that I too could make a difference. No matter how big or small, I wanted to make that difference.

I was interested in the internship when I first heard about this program, but that is not the only reason that I wanted to participate. I knew that obtaining an internship was possible, but it would not be easy or guaranteed. I went into this saying "Even if I don't get an internship, I won't regret one second of the time I have put into my efforts. I have learned so much already. Just coming this far has provoked a new interest in my heart; I only hope that I can continue in my interest and learning with an internship." So, I applied for the internship. I had no idea what was in store for me.

After the writing, the recommendations, and the waiting, I finally received news that I was one of the 19 students to be interviewed for an internship. I was ecstatic! I never fully expected to have gotten that far. Weeks of waiting after my interview finally halted as well when I opened the letter telling me that I was to be a 2003 World Food Prize Intern. I couldn't wait to find out where I would be going and what I would be doing.

I was first accepted as an intern in Beijing, China, but because of the SARS epidemic, which broke out and was very dangerous at the time, the internship in China was canceled. I had the option to wait for news of another possible opening for the same summer, or wait until next summer and try for the internship in China once more. Ultimately I decided to wait for a reassignment for the same summer. The World Food Prize placed me in San Jose, Costa Rica at the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture. I worked under the supervision of lawyer Kay McClanahan and worked closely with project coordinator Federico Sancho.

The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, or IICA, is the "agency for agriculture and the promotion of rural well-being." It was founded 60 years ago and today has 34 offices in all of the Americas and Spain. The mission of the IICA office in Costa Rica is:

*"To support Costa Rica in its search for progress and prosperity, through the modernization of its rural areas, the promotion of food security and the development of an agricultural sector that is competitive, technologically prepared, environmentally managed and socially equitable." (IICA Costa Rica website, 2003).*

Six strategic action programs focused on at IICA in the Costa Rica office are as follows:

1. Trade and Agribusiness
2. Technology and Innovation
3. Agricultural Health and Food Safety
4. Sustainable Rural Development

## 5. Training and Education

## 6. Information and Communication

The IICA is always looking for new projects and new ways to help people in each of those strategic areas. One new project they have started working on is **Agrotourism**. Because it is a new field, Federico Sancho thought I would find it interesting and it would allow me to develop my own plan of action, be it at the institute or in the field. Therefore, he assigned me a project on agrotourism. It was my responsibility to find alternative methods for the Costa Rican farmers to bring in their incomes using tourism. I did not believe I could study this topic solely from a computer and a desk. Therefore, as I developed my plan of action I decided to divide my research between the institute, the farms and other miscellaneous locations.

### I. Costa Rica

#### Economy:

Costa Rica has a relatively strong free market economy. It depends heavily on agriculture and more recently on tourism and electronic exports as well. Despite efforts to diversify, agriculture remains the most important part of the economy. About 11% of the annual GDP comes from agriculture (2000), and 20% of the 1.9 million strong labor force are occupied in agriculture (1999). The unemployment rate is 5.2% (2000). Though poverty in Costa Rica has been reduced in the last fifteen years, still a substantial amount of the population lives in poverty. "It is estimated that nearly 20% of the country's inhabitants live below the poverty line and are largely concentrated in rural areas, where three out of every four Costa Ricans live in conditions of poverty" (IICA and Costa Rica: A new vision for 2002-2006). Most of the world's poorest live in the rural areas, and this holds true for Costa Rica as well. This means that the Tico farmers are some of the population's poorest people. As the poorest of the population spends most of their income on food, they have very little left for clothing, education, and health, among other things.

#### Agriculture:

As mentioned above, agriculture is the most important part of the Costa Rican economy. It accounts for about 70% of exports, coffee and bananas being the main two.

Of the nearly 4,000,000 people inhabiting Costa Rica, an estimated 20% of them work in farming. Since the terrain of the country does not allow for easy cultivation of many large plantations, the majority of farmers depend mainly on small family farms to make a living.

The typical farm in Costa Rica is nothing like those farms I have seen in Iowa. In Iowa, farmers produce only a few cash crops at the maximum yield. There is not much diversification. In Costa Rican farms, however, the exact opposite is true. Diversification means security. They produce many different crops and products in small amounts. Diverse production also ensures ample food for the family. Iowan farmers do not typically produce food for their own families, but rather rely on the availability of food elsewhere, such as the grocery store. For the Ticos, diversification also means security in the event of a natural disaster. Should a natural disaster destroy one part of production, they have other parts to fall back on. For example: If a flood destroys one crop, they may still have other crops and livestock to live on and earn money. Another thing I noticed about farms in Costa Rica is that very few have been

mechanized. For the most part, the farmers still practice traditional farming, using backbreaking hand labor to bring in their living.

During my stay in Costa Rica, I was able to see many different kinds of farms at different levels of prosperity. The following are different examples of some farms I visited:

<b>Farm A:</b>	Farm A had two garden areas. One very large with fruits, vegetables, herbs, etc., and the other only with chili peppers. They had cows, goats, chickens, turkeys, geese, and sheep. There were apartments that the owner rents out and they were in the process of building more. Overall, this farm was rather well developed and still developing.
----------------	--

<b>Farm B:</b>	Farm B did not seem as well developed as the others. I did not see any produce or gardens, only livestock: cows, goats, and horses. It was kept up poorly, unlike many of the other farms I had visited at the time. This farm was not very well established and had many areas to improve.
----------------	---

<b>Farm C:</b>	Farm C had cows and new milking equipment. I am not sure if they had a garden or if it was only a dairy farm, as I did not see the whole farm. They also offer very nice guest housing and were in the process of starting a restaurant. This farm was very well developed.
----------------	---

<p><b>Finca de Esperanza:</b></p>	<p>La Finca de Esperanza is a farm that practices only organic methods. It is very well developed and has started other projects outside of only farming. Anselmo Rodriguez, the owner, makes, uses, and sells his own very rich and all organic fertilizer. He has also developed his own recipe for banana vinegar, which is rumored to be very good for the health. Because of his superb organic practices, other farmers who are members of cooperatives come to his farm to stay and learn his techniques. He has also started to bring tourism into his farm. People come to see how he runs his farm and the trail circling his farm, which passes through a small piece of tropical forest on his land. His daughter cooks lunch for the visitors as well.</p>
-----------------------------------	---

Most of the farmers in Costa Rica, no matter how different, bring in their income in relatively the same manner. The first most common is through the production of fresh fruit and vegetables. As I mentioned before, farmers here maintain a very diverse production in lesser quantities. Due to the volcanoes scattered about the country, Costa Rica's land holds rich soils. In addition to the rich soils, the many different levels of elevation in Costa Rica create different climates in different regions of the country. This rich soil and the various different "microclimates" allow for diverse agricultural production.

Costa Rican farmers grow an expansive range of produce on their farms. They produce vegetables such as carrots, peppers, yuca, and challole; fruits like mango, papaya, banana, and guayaba; and much more. Seventy percent of exports from Costa Rica come from agriculture. Some other highly exported food crops include corn, sugar, rice, beans, potatoes, pineapple, and coffee. Ornamental flowers and plants have been a growing industry recently as well. Small farms, however, do not export their products, but sell them in the local markets and stores. Most of the small farmers produce crops for sale and for family consumption.

Dairy processing is also very common in the farming sector of Costa Rica. The farmers often make and sell their own cheese, butter, and natilla. They also sell their milk to companies such as Dos Pinos for processing.

In addition to fresh produce and dairy, many farmers are meat producers. Beef is most common, but some produce pork and chicken as well.

Some of the less common practices earning farmers their income include things like harvesting trees for timber, offering housing for rent, selling flowers, and very few have already begun bringing tourists into their farms as well.

Traditional agriculture in Costa Rica is suffering greatly in today's market. These farmers face many problems prohibiting them from reaching their full potential. Some of the larger issues include low market access, financing, and lack of maintenance/ management skills.

I found the idea of low market access surprising, since I saw many markets when we drove through the cities. I believe the problem could be, however, that there are many farmers trying to get to the markets and they have become full. When I went to the market with my host mother on Saturday mornings, I always saw the same farmers at the same spot every week. This has led me to believe that when a farmer

does not have a market to go to, it will be forever difficult to find one since the same farmers are at the markets every week. Without a market to sell their produce, some farmers are forced to set up sale at the side of the busy roads. This does not offer a very high sales rate, and much work time on the farm is lost.

Another problem is financing. It is becoming increasingly difficult for farmers to get credit and take out loans. Even if they can get credit, the loan sizes are being reduced as well. Help from cooperatives, distributors, and a few governmental programs have offered a little help in this area, but not a significant amount. As result of the lack of financing, many farmers are forced to buy cheaper seeds. This means that the quality of the product will potentially be reduced, and in turn, the selling price of the product may fall as well.

The lack of management and maintenance skills is also an increasing problem. Many farmers cannot properly manage and maintain their farming business. This limits their potential to make the most out of what they have. I believe that with the help of cooperatives this problem can be alleviated. However, many farmers may not have access to information about cooperatives, and some simply do not want to spend the time and effort to participate. If they do not have information, they may not understand the potential benefit that cooperatives offer.

These problems all come to two very negative results. Each of these problems contributes to the loss of money on the farm, thus making farmers poorer and poorer. Farmers in Costa Rica now make up a large portion of the poor population in the country. As the farming incomes continue to drop, so does the number of farmers. The farmers of Costa Rica are now losing interest in farming because of this drop in income.

If farmers continue to lose money, and Costa Rica loses its farmers, the economy will feel the impact heavily. Even with efforts to expand and diversify, agriculture remains the most important part of the Costa Rican economy. That is why it is so important to find additional forms of income for the farmers. If the farms of Costa Rica are to grow and expand, Tico farmers need something more.

### Tourism:

Tourism has been around for centuries, but in the last fifty years tourist numbers have multiplied rapidly. In 1950, the number of international tourists was estimated to be 25 million. Fifty years later, in the year 2000, the numbers reached a phenomenal 698 million. As travel around the world is monitored, the Americas are found to attract about 17.5% of the tourism market. Costa Rica has been gaining much of this popularity due to the riches the land offers.

Costa Rica is home to many different ecosystems, which include wetlands and different types of forests. Among these forests are tropical dry forests, deciduous forests, cloud forests, and the ever-popular rain forests. Costa Rica is also considered one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. In addition to biodiversity, mountains and volcanoes scatter the beautiful country. There are over 100 volcanic craters in Costa Rica. Each of these factors in addition to the beautiful beaches and an average year-round temperature of 75 degrees Fahrenheit make this country an increasingly desired tourist destination.

As tourism in Costa Rica grows each year, there are more and more activities catering to the tourist crowd and the economy is depending on tourism more as well. Professional technical schools in highly tourist-populated areas are even considering bringing tourism into the schools. This would provide the students with the knowledge and skills to obtain a job or create their own business in relation to

tourism. Next to agriculture, tourism is one of the most important parts of the Costa Rican economy today. In a country where tourism and agriculture are of nearly equal importance, agrotourism could prove to be an excellent source of added income for small farmers.

Agrotourism is the joining of agriculture and tourism. It is making agriculture a tourist attraction. If agrotourism is incorporated into farming with little extra cost and low maintenance, with time it could significantly increase the farmers' income. Agrotourism in Costa Rica's small farms could hold the farming interest and possibly generate new interest.

When I first started this project, before I visited any of the farms, I started to research online and develop possible ideas. After visiting farms and working on one farm already starting an agrotourism project, I was able to further analyze and develop my ideas.

Many of the routines that Tico farmers perform regularly every day are activities of interest to the tourist community, whether local or international, business or pleasure. Each of these activities holds the potential to earn additional income for the farmers.

#### A few possibilities:

Some of the ideas I came up with for the farmers to implement on their farms are as follows. Not every farmer may be able to use each of these and not every farmer will want to use each of these. So much of the progress of the farm heavily depends on the willingness of the farmer to open up to new ideas, learn, and try new things.

Here are my ideas:

The farmer can take the tourists on a basic tour of the farm and explain the daily activities and routine. Tourists are then able to see the farm in action. The farmer should explain all of the plants, insects, and animals on the farm along with the processes and activities, as they are a part of the extreme biodiversity in Costa Rica. The farmer could also offer to allow tourists to participate in some activities of the farm, such as milking a cow, helping to make cheese, picking vegetables, etc. One of the advantages in allowing tourists take part in the process is that they are then more likely to buy products on the farm such as cheese if they helped make it, or vegetables that they picked themselves.

Small sections of forest on a farm can attract a lot of tourist interest as well. If farmers have property with forest growing on it, they could create a trail and offer tours through this section with explanations of the vegetation and wildlife. After the project has developed a little more and become more successful, the farmer may even want to buy or make signs for different parts of the trail through the forest. This makes the experience more interesting for the visitor.

Another possibility for the farmer is starting a butterfly garden. Costa Rica has many species of butterflies and butterfly gardens are an increasingly popular attraction. To create a butterfly garden, however, involves a lot of effort. An effective butterfly garden should have plants for all stages of the butterfly's life and should have a variety of plants for different species of butterflies. Many farmers likely do not have that knowledge, and therefore will have to do some research in order to obtain that information.

In addition to the routines and nature, farmers should offer a taste of Tico culture for the non-local tourists. Traditions and customs are core ingredients in agrotourism. It can make the visit more exciting and memorable. To accomplish this,



there are several options for the farmer. First, as the farmer is offering tours throughout the farm and forest, any traditional practices should be explained. This includes traditional uses for fruit, vegetables, and plants, as well as any stories that may go along with them. Second, since it is customary for the women in rural areas to remain in the home, they could cook traditional meals for the visitors. Third, if there is space and resources available, the farmer can offer guest housing, which reflects the traditional Tico style for overnight stays on the farm. This is something that may have to be done after the project has had time to develop and be successful, as it can be expensive if the facilities are not already present.

Besides raising the income of the farmers, an agrotourism project has other potential benefits as well.

First, there is a very strong potential to raise the bioliteracy levels. Bioliteracy is the understanding of biodiversity and the gaining of respect for the environment and all its inhabitants. It is important that the people of Costa Rica are bioliterate in order to preserve the biodiversity of the land. Biodiversity must be preserved because Costa Rica's many different ecosystems thrive on it. Moreover, as mentioned before, the many different ecosystems are what allow for the diverse agricultural production.

### Biodiversity in Costa Rica

Costa Rica, only occupying about 0.01% of the world's land area, holds approximately 4% of the world's biodiversity. With about 500,000 species inside the country, Costa Rica has the densest biodiversity in the world. It is important to maintain this biodiversity, for without it Costa Rica's ecosystems would fall to ruins.

Besides the importance for the ecosystems, biodiversity has become one of the main attractions in Costa Rica. People come from around the world to see the thousands of different species found here. Whether they come to study or as tourists, they bring in a significant amount of income for the country. As I mentioned before, Costa Rica is relying more on this income.

Though there are over 500,000 different species living in Costa Rica, nearly 84% of them are still unknown. This means that scientists are always researching and collecting different species. This could work to the advantage for some farmers. Some farmers with land of abundant biodiversity may want to consider renting a portion of their land to a research center. This would ensure conservation of the area, a contribution to knowledge of biodiversity and the environment and ultimately to the preservation of biodiversity, and generation of extra income for the farmer at little or no extra cost.

In addition to the benefits for biodiversity, agrotourism projects can also provide more knowledge about organic farming. This is significant for several reasons. First, Costa Rica has some of the highest pesticide usage rates in the world and the expansion of organic farming techniques would lower the use of pesticides. Second, if farmers begin to use organic farming techniques they will have a higher quality product and thus be able to sell it at higher prices. Third, organic farms are likely to bring in more tourists than non-organic farms. One of the best ways for farmers to learn about organic farming practices is through the exchange of cooperatives.

### Starting an agrotourism project:

The first part in starting an agrotourism project is obtaining the information about it. A general plan should be developed for farmers to follow and this plan

should be made available where farmers obtain other information, such as the Rural Information Center.

After this information is obtained, the farmer can begin to assess his options. First, he must decide what he wants to bring to the farm, how much work and effort he is willing to put into it, and then he must realize his farm's capabilities. After gaining an idea of what he can do and what he wants to do, he should consider an effective "order of events" that will ensure a smooth and effective development of the project. The development plan for starting an agrotourism project will help with creating an order for implementation. As soon as the farmer customizes his plan to fit his needs, wants, and capabilities, he can begin his work.

Many of the farmers who can benefit most from an agrotourism project on their farm lack the management and development skills necessary to maintain the project. They may receive help initiating the project, but will ultimately need training in order to manage and maintain it themselves. One possible option for this training is through the help of cooperatives. Farmers can travel and stay a week at other, well-established farms already offering tourist activities. During this time, they will learn the tactics of organic farming, maintenance skills, and effective management for a tourist friendly farm, as well as possible ideas for tourist attractions. I believe one of the first things a farmer should do when starting an agrotourism project is to get involved with a cooperative.

As a farmer is beginning his agrotourism project and thereafter, he should consider a number of things to ensure the protection of the environment with minimum impact, and to maximize the outcome of his efforts.

If a farmer is to offer any form of guest housing or accommodations, the following should be considered:

-How destructible to the surrounding environment is it? The farmer needs to keep the negative impacts on the surrounding natural environment as minimal as possible. To do this he should keep the accommodations small and simple.

-What type of energy is being used? It will be less harmful and less wasteful if the farmer uses natural and replenishable energy sources. A few example of this are the use of solar energy and the self-creation of natural gas from waste. The farmer should look for other ways to save energy such as low-flow toilets and showers and low energy lights. He should also recycle as much waste and in as many ways as possible.

-The last thing to consider with guest housing and accommodations is whether it reflects the local culture well. It should not be modernized, but rather very traditional Costa Rica style.

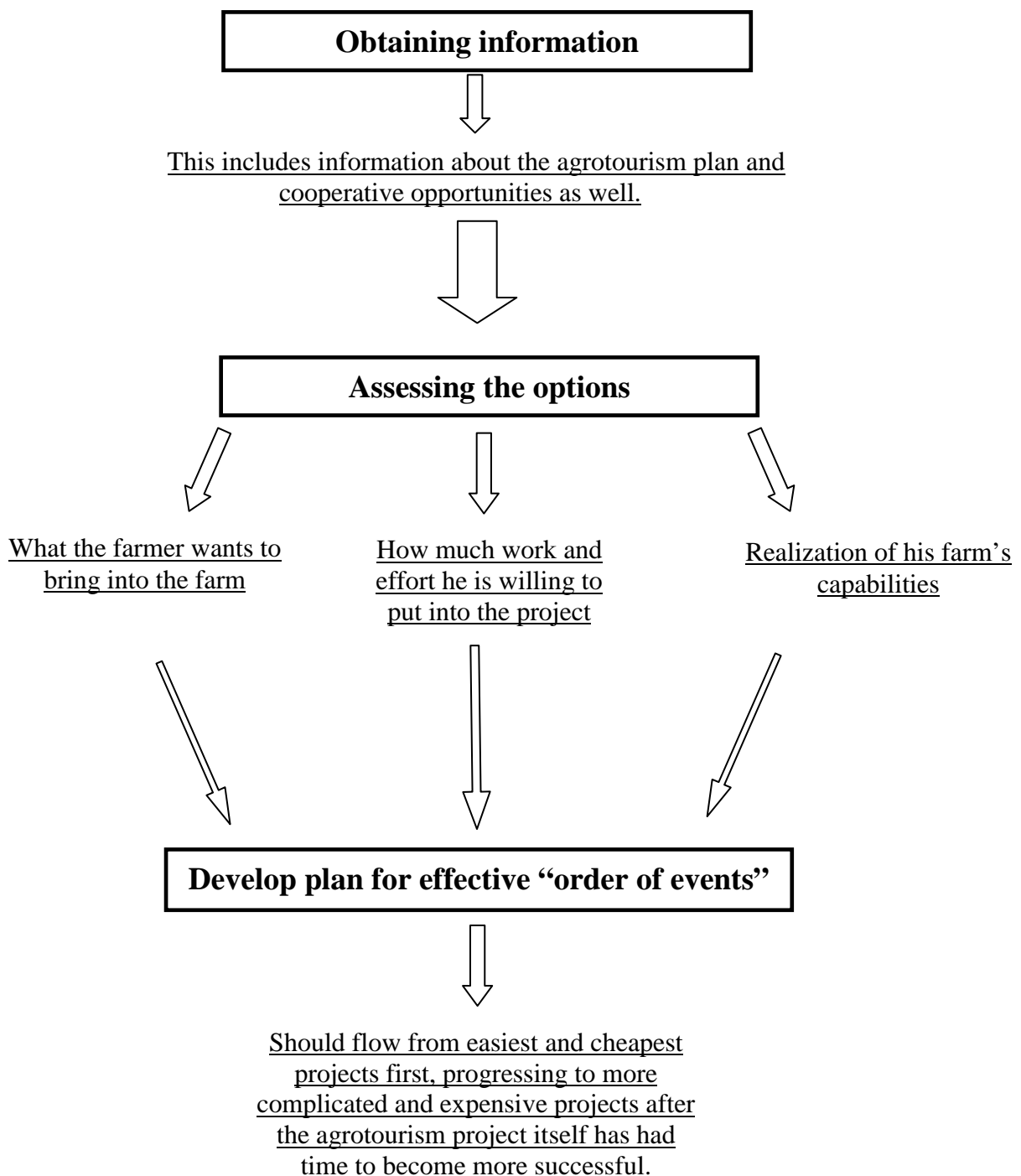
There are also a few proposed guidelines to prevent extreme environmental damage from tourists in all aspects:

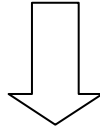
1. Keep the sizes of visiting groups small.
2. Record an informal census of how many total tourists are visiting the area, and set a limit for how many may visit within a certain time frame (possibly schedule open and closed days to help control this).
3. Before visitors reach the area, or before they begin their tour, brief them on proper interactive behavior with the environment (wild animals, fragile

plants, etc.). A briefing on the local laws may also be wise for the non-local visitors.

4. Advise tourists not to collect souvenirs from the environment, such as flowers, feathers, bones, etc. unless specifically given permission by the farmers.
5. Create area specific regulations for behavior, acceptable practices, and trash disposal (advise against bringing disposable items that will add to the solid waste, give specific instructions on how and where to dispose, etc.).

An agrotourism project will not develop overnight. It will take time, planning, careful consideration, learning, and patience. The following is a general outline I have developed to follow when creating an agrotourism plan of action:

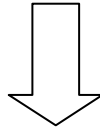




**Begin to plan for the work of individual projects**



Make sure all plans are in cooperation with the environment and will maximize the outcome of the efforts.



**Start working!**

The ultimate plan of action should be flexible enough to be adapted to all farms, but still strong enough to give good direction for farmers to start a project. Still, no matter how effective and easy a plan of action may be, it is inevitable that some farmers will leave farming for the more appealing urban life. Some simply do not want to put forth the effort, possibly due to a lack of understanding the enormous potential. The success also depends heavily on the individual ambitions and aspirations of each farmer.

I believe that with the proper management and care for the farm and surrounding environment, an agrotourism project has the potential to be very successful. I think it will be more helpful than harmful—environmentally and financially. It definitely has great potential to make a significant and positive impact on the rural sector of Costa Rica, consequently preserving agricultural interest and furthermore, continuing the construction of a stronger economy.

#### My Experiences:

My eight weeks in Costa Rica has changed my outlook on life in many ways. It has opened my eyes to new things on personal levels, cultural levels, and world levels. I left Iowa knowing that the internship would show me many different things about life and the world, but I never imagined it could change the way I think about life in such a significant way.

Living with a Tico family during my internship really helped me to experience the culture first hand. However, I was lucky and had the added bonus of gaining some

understanding of the Italian culture as well. My host brothers were both half Italian and had lived in Italy for nine years. Seeing and gaining new understandings of other cultures makes a person think more about how the world works, why people act the way they do and live the way they do. It gave me a new insight on how these cycles of poverty keep revolving and helped me to understand that people have to be taught, not given, the things they need to survive. It is like the saying goes, "Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll eat for a lifetime."

All my life I have had a passion for helping others. Seeing new forms of hardship and poverty I had never been exposed to before have fueled that passion. It has ignited an eternal flame in my heart for those people who live such lives. I do not know where my future will take me, what exactly I am going to do with my life. There are many ways I can and want to help and only time will tell which is right for me. But after the internship I have come to believe that no matter where or how I make a difference, no difference is too great or small. The difference itself counts, and I'm on my way to make it.





One of the signs I painted to hang along the tropical trail surrounding La Finca de Esperanza (the Farm of Hope).



Me working in one of the organic gardens at La Finca de Esperanza. I am transferring cabbage from one row to another to give them more room to grow.



<<< This is me with the giant tree growing in one of the gardens at CATIE research center. The IICA station in Costa Rica started out as a part of CATIE before breaking off as IICA.



This is me and my three-toed sloth friend, Buttercup. We met at the Sloth Re-habilitation Center.





A farmer's granddaughter making and packing butter for sale.



Farmers use this large white flower called "Reina de la Noche", or "Queen of the Night" as a pest repellent. It opens up at night and emits a toxic odor, which repels insects.



<<< Project coordinator Federico Sancho and I on a ferry after visiting several technical professional high schools in Costa Rica.



My host family and I at home. From left: my oldest host brother Eduardo, my host mother Mirian, and youngest host brother Diego.