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Environmental knowledge and awareness gets out of the classroom



(Infocom) – Children from schools located in the surroundings of the Guanacaste Conservation Area (ACG) continue to nurture a friendly relationship with the region's environment and natural history thanks to the ACG's Biological Education Program.

This program has made it possible for elementary school kids in 4-6 grades as well as for secondary school students, for more than two decades, to get close to and experience the ecosystems that exist within the large ACG.

According to Rolando Vega Contreras, a teacher who welcomes and trains students at the Santa Rosa National Park

(one of the protected areas within the ACG), the goal of the program is to take advantage of this "open classroom" to teach children and youth, on-site, about three key topics: natural history, ecology and biology. Vega indicated that this bio-literacy model — promoted in the 1980s by renowned researcher Daniel Hunt Janzen, the leading dry tropical forest expert — is a model unique in the world.

That's why it's very common to see the program's teachers walking with a group of children in the forest (all wearing chaps to protect from snake bites and thorn injuries), learning first-hand about the characteristics of the local flora and fauna. Or you can see them under the shade of a higueron fig tree, using flipcharts to explain the process of pollination, for example.

According to Luis Fernando Bejarano, a teacher at the Las Lilas School, which is located not far from the park, the attitude these kids developed thanks to the program is very valuable, because by knowing the natural riches around them they learn to respect the environment and join in the conservation effort.

"It's uncommon now to see kids damaging trees. They don't play with slingshots killing little birds. They are concerned about forest fires," Bejarano said.

Additionally, Bejarano values the importance of this program to maximize the impact of the Ministry of Public Education's (MEP) school curricula.

"They are learning much better in the classroom now, because they remember what they saw in the forest, or what the program's teacher explained to them. They assimilate things better and get very excited with these tours," he explained.

Each school participating in the ACG's Biological Education Program makes between four and six annual visits to different parts of the conservation area — which covers from marine ecosystems to dry tropical forests such as Santa Rosa to the cloud forests located in the Rincon de la Vieja National Park.

Currently, this program works with 51 educational centers in the region, with a total of 2,450 children and teens participating in it.

During each visit, the students, in addition to receiving training in the "outdoor classroom," complement such activities with laboratory work at the ACG stations and parks.

"These kids are the future leaders of these communities, and if they become bio-literate, well, the results will be much better and the environment will be the winner," Vega said.

Another important aspect of this program is that, in addition to the work directly done by ACG teachers in teaching students, there's a similar training program for educators so that they can complement, reaffirm or enrich their educational tactics in participating schools.

Furthermore, the ACG program periodically organizes more intensive workshops with students who stand out in the regular training sessions. The program has funds that make it possible for even low-income students to participate in these workshops, paying for transportation, food, lodging and materials. The idea is that these kids will, in the short, medium and long term, serve as propagators of contents deeper than those they are learning.

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