

Thoughts on Eco-Voluntourism

Although folks are doing a lot of streamlining these days, the concept of combining travel, personal interest and volunteer service is not new. Hundreds of years ago, long before the founding of the Peace Corps in 1961, missionaries, sailors, and healers journeyed to far off lands for the purpose of helping others. Since then, what we now know as "voluntourism" has become one of the fastest growing forms of travel in the world.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP



Photo courtesy of Raeford Dwyer

It's no surprise, then, that more and more people are combining their interest in service and travel with their passion for the environment. In fact, according to [a recent survey of U.S. based volunteer travel providers](#), conservation is one of the most popular international volunteer travel activities, ranking just behind community development and teaching.

To begin our journey into the world of eco-voluntourism, we checked in with David Clemmons, founder of [VolunTourism.org](#), an organization dedicated to serving all members of the volunteer travel community: travelers, members of the tourism industry, and non-profit organizations. According to David, "There are many different approaches to Eco-VolunTourism.* Some are expedition-based. Some expand capacity at a local level. Some incorporate local communities in the revenue-generation of travel and tourism through traditional building practices, which are inherently ecologically sustainable. Still others connect individuals to voluntary service through an ecologically friendly accommodation."



Photo courtesy of Jennifer Olsen



Photo courtesy of Cotton

Tree Lodge

With David's comments in mind, we share three different perspectives on eco-voluntourism. We chat with Rich Tobin, a former U.S. park ranger who combined his 30 years of park management expertise with his passion for the world's great natural and cultural places to create [Conservation Volunteers International Program \(Conservation VIP\)](#). We also talk with Sarah Kennedy of the non-profit [Sustainable Harvest International](#) and Jeff Pzena from the eco-friendly [Cotton Tree Lodge](#) in Belize. Jeff and Sarah partner to offer incredible eco-voluntourism opportunities in Central America - including one trip that is a dream come true for any chocolate-loving do-gooder.

Lacking the time and funds to travel to far off places, Leaf Litter's editor, Amy Nelson, creates her own, [low-budget, local eco-voluntourism experience](#).

It would be foolish to explore the topic of eco-voluntourism without shining our [Non-Profit Spotlight](#) on [Earthwatch Institute](#), which bills itself "the world's largest environmental volunteer nonprofit organization."

If you are considering an eco-voluntourism trip for your next vacation, you'll want to check out our list of [resources](#).

Finally, we offer a glimpse into the [latest news at Biohabitats](#).

*David's organization prefers this spelling of the word. An interesting and brief history of the term "voluntourism" can be found on the [VolunTourism.org web site](#).



Leaf Litter Talks with Rich Tobin

**CEO, Conservation Volunteers
International Program (Conservation
VIP)**



Conservation Volunteers International Program, Inc. (Conservation VIP), an organization that offers volunteers an opportunity to help conserve some of the greatest wild and cultural places in the world. In Machu Picchu, for example, Conservation VIP volunteers have protected ecosystems along the Inca Trail and removed invasive plants from the walls of the Temple of the Moon.

The visionary founder and CEO of Conservation VIP, Rich Tobin began his professional career as a park ranger. Having spent three decades with the National Park Service and other national agencies, Rich advocated for sustainable management of natural and cultural resources in diverse American landscapes. While visiting international parks as a tourist, Rich realized that his ranger skills could make a significant contribution to the protection of national parks in other parts of the world. This led to a series of pilot volunteer projects beginning in 2005 and the creation of Conservation VIP in 2008.

Rich believes that environmental problems respect no borders, and threaten the health, prosperity and even the national security of nations. The work by volunteers demonstrates that people from all over the world--who may disagree on many issues--can set differences aside and work together to protect the natural world and cultural patrimony. Conservation VIP encourages us to accept our share of the responsibility for protecting the natural world and our cultural patrimony.

Rich earned his undergraduate degree in Environmental Planning at the University of California, Davis, and his Masters in Natural Resources Management from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. When not leading volunteer expeditions, and furthering Conservation VIP's mission of "making friends one kilometer at a time," Rich enjoys mountaineering, sailing, surfing and international travel.

Tell me a little bit about your background and what led you to start the Conservation VIP.

I enjoyed a wonderful, first career as a park ranger. For 30 years, I worked in California, Alaska, Oregon, Florida and Washington, DC for the National Park Service, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. When I began my career, the traditional paradigm for public land managers was, "We're the experts and we know how best to manage resources and people." Today that view has largely been eclipsed by the realization that public land resources can best be managed in partnership with the public. Conservation VIP takes that paradigm shift one step further by involving volunteers, visitors, local communities, business, schools, NGOs and government at all levels.

The idea of Conservation VIP began during a vacation trip to Patagonia in early 2003. I was trekking in [Torres del Paine National Park](#) in Chile and as a resource professional, it was obvious to me that there were resource challenges facing the park rangers. In speaking with several rangers, I learned that although they recognized these challenges, they felt unable to be responsive. Visitation had increased in Torres del Paine significantly in a short number of years, impacting trails and wildlife habitat. They also had problems with fires that had started because of careless visitors in the park. They had no way to restore the natural landscape. Their budget was limited to \$30,000 per year - for everything.



Torres del Paine National Park. Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

In my discussion with park rangers, I explained - to their surprise - that natural resources agencies in the U.S. also had budget constraints and that increasingly, U.S. parks and forests turn to volunteers to help complement the professional workforce. The rangers looked at me and asked, "Why would anyone want to do that?" This discussion was a real eye opener to me about how people in other countries think

about volunteers helping to protect national treasures.

I explained that we call upon volunteers who give of themselves to help protect places they love. They said, "Even if we had volunteers, we have no way to supervise them, and we have no tools." This was true. I had hiked with a ranger and asked if we could bring a shovel along so I could demonstrate some effective trail maintenance techniques and the park did not have a single shovel.

From that trip came the idea that perhaps there was something I could do to bring volunteers to Torres del Paine to help the park rangers. I realized, though, that visitor volunteers would not be enough. We'd really need to involve and engage the communities. Community members often said that visitors would come through town, but not stay there. So the community

was not benefiting economically. Members of the community were saying, "Why should I support the park? We're not deriving any benefit from it."

There were also pressures from development, livestock grazing adjacent to the park and poaching inside of the park. We felt that if we got the community involved, they'd see that it was to their benefit to help protect and support the park. Visitors would stop there, and the community would benefit. We reached out to universities - both their researchers and students - to give them opportunities to learn about natural resources management. We also reached out to other non-governmental organizations in the area, especially [Fundacion Patagonia](#). And certainly we reached out to [Chile's national park service, CONAF \(Corporación Nacional Forestal\)](#). We also reached out to the Chilean Foreign Ministry and U.S. Department of State to explain this unique opportunity to help protect this [World Biosphere Reserve](#).



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

I returned to Chile in 2004 and met with members of CONAF at their headquarters in Santiago. I presented the concept of bringing all of the players together to help protect Torres del Paine. At the time, many people said, "This is Chile. This is government bureaucracy. Don't expect to hear anything for a long time." Well, I left on Friday, and on Monday, I already had an email that the project had been approved. They were that enthusiastic about trying the project as a pilot. Once the project was approved by CONAF, Chile's Foreign Ministry and the U.S. Department of State placed the Patagonia Volunteer Project onto the program of work between both countries under the Chile-U.S. Environmental Cooperation Agreement, a part of the [Chile-US Free Trade Agreement](#). We then began recruiting volunteers from across the U.S.

How did you recruit these volunteers?

We are very fortunate in that the Los Angeles Times included a small story about the project and the article was picked up by papers across the country. We also recruited people through word of mouth and through other resource professionals and conservation organizations. We had a group of 30 volunteers of all ages, from all walks of life, who came together to give something back to this resource at the southern extreme of Latin America.

Just days before our visit, a camper had knocked over a stove in the park, which started a fire. High winds quickly blew the fire into a major conflagration of over 35,000 acres (14,000 hectares) and the entire park had to be closed. The park service still wanted us to come. We arrived just after the fire was out, and one of our projects was the restoration of the fire area. This was in addition to the trail work we accomplished in the park.

Everyone involved was very happy with our accomplishments. We were invited back, and we have continued to volunteer in Torres del Paine for the past five years.

How did you involve members of the local community in that first project?



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

We made a point of purchasing all of our tools locally, staying in the community and using their restaurants and hotels. We also asked community members to join us to work side-by-side. Rather than being a group of gringos coming down and working independently, we always encourage community members, rangers, concession employees on their days off, as well as other visitors from around the

world to join us. Whether it's carrying some tools a short distance down the trail, or spending an hour or part of a day or week with us, we encourage people to work with us. That's part of our mission: Making friends one kilometer at a time. This involves engaging and including the community in all of our projects.

We made a significant economic contribution to the community. We also encouraged them to begin communicating more with the park. Communication between the local community and the park had been limited at best. A good example of that is when the fire occurred. The park was closed, and all visitors were told to leave, yet the park never called the community to say, "The park is closed and we have thousands of visitors coming your way." We see part of our responsibility as bringing the park community and the local community together to help each other.

How does connecting with local people enhance the ecovoluntourism experience for your volunteers?

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Our volunteers consistently tell us that interacting and working side by side with locals is a major highlight of their experience. Much more than rebuilding a kilometer of trail or restoring a meadow area, the opportunity to feel part of a community is one of the most important aspects of our volunteers' experience.



*Trail work in Torres del Paine.
Photo courtesy of
Conservation VIP*

Natural resource scarcity is the most pressing issue that we face on a global scale. If, with our projects, people can set aside differences and work together to protect areas such as national parks, then we can work together to address other pressing resource issues, such as clean air and clean water. In this small way, we see volunteer projects like ours as ways to improve communication and understanding between nations. It's a small step toward helping worldwide peace efforts. I see the work that we do as demonstrating that individuals can make a difference. The Margaret Mead quote often runs through my mind:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Conservation VIP works to "help conserve some of the world's greatest wild places and cultural sites." Your current programs are in Peru, Chile and the U.S. Can you briefly describe the wild and cultural places you are working to restore in your project areas, as well as the major threats they face?



Before/after photos of a Conservation VIP trail restoration in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile. The new trail is constructed to shed water laterally rather than down the trail.

Visitation has increased significantly in Torres del Paine. The present trails were never designed as hiker trails. They are old sheep trails that people have continued to use and they are in poor condition. People will get their feet wet and create new, adjacent trails.

Erosion is causing soils to cut down the trails and get into streams and lakes. Some of the trails pass through sensitive wildlife habitat. In

Torres del Paine, we go into an area, identify the correct trail location that will avoid erosion, restore fragile areas and get the trail away from sensitive wildlife habitat. We find that once trails are properly located and constructed, visitors are more than happy to stay on them.

Machu Picchu Sanctuary stands at a crossroads. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is considering placing it on its list of threatened [World Heritage sites](#) because of uncontrolled growth, visitor activities and [local development](#). Budget reductions in the park have placed additional strains on local managers. At the same time, there is increasing visitation. As a quick example, last year there were 25 full time employees in Machu Picchu supporting archeologists by removing invasive species and other plants that were impacting buildings and other archeological treasures. This year, there are only nine. Uncontrolled development is occurring in the gateway community of Aguas Calientes, where a sewage treatment plant has failed and is now dumping raw sewage in the Urubamba River that runs through the Sanctuary and flows out into the Amazon. Most people think of Machu Picchu as only the Sacred City at the top of the mountain. It's actually an 80,500 acres (32,600 hectare) national park. The community of Aguas Calientes is inside the park at the foot of the Sacred City. It's from Aguas Calientes that visitors will, generally, get on a bus and drive 20 minutes up 2000 feet in elevation to get to the mountaintop. Visitors will stay in the community. That community has unregulated growth, to the point that the sewage treatment plant has failed.



Machu Picchu Sacred City. Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

What's bringing on the growth? Visitors to the Sanctuary?

Yes. Machu Picchu Sanctuary is the number one visited site in Peru and by many accounts, the number one destination in Latin America. The train system has increased the number of trains traveling into Machu Picchu every day. The community, seeing the economic opportunity, has grown rapidly.

So its unique appeal could eventually lead to its demise?

Exactly, and that's the concern of UNESCO. Machu Picchu was reviewed in July 2008 and UNESCO almost placed it on the list of threatened World Heritage sites. Instead, they gave the Sanctuary a list of work that needed to be undertaken immediately in order to reduce this threat. Our volunteer projects directly address the list by restoring sites and reducing visitor impacts.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

I read that Conservation VIP is the only organization allowed to do this kind of work in Machu Picchu. How did you earn that trust within Peru?

We focused all of our energy in Torres del Paine National Park for three years. One site. One project. Three years. We earned the trust of Chile's National Park Service, at their headquarters in Santiago and at the park in Patagonia. We also

worked closely with the communities, NGOs, universities and businesses in the area.

We then identified areas of concern in Machu Picchu Sanctuary and approached Peru's national institutes responsible for managing the area. It's especially challenging in Machu Picchu. In most national parks, there is one superintendent; one agency managing the resource. In the case of Machu Picchu, there are actually two agencies responsible: the National Institute of Culture within the Ministry of Education and (at the time) the National Institute for Natural Resources within the Ministry of Agriculture. We brought our proposal to both agencies. Over two years of coordination and discussions, we demonstrated a track record of successful conservation work in Chile; our willingness to listen and respond to their most pressing projects; and an ability to be self-sufficient. Our volunteers pay for all of their expenses, bring economic benefits to the community, and at the end of their trips, donate all our equipment. In two years, we were able to develop a pilot project in November of 2008 in which we brought in volunteers and responded to their entire array of issues where they needed assistance.

How would you evaluate the pilot project and how was it received?

It was received very well. When we returned last month, both national government agencies were happy to see us and excited about the work lined up for us. We were able to accomplish a significant quantity and quality of work...everything on their list.

Peru now has a Ministry of the Environment. The Natural Resources group name was changed to the National Service for Protected Area Management and moved to the new Ministry of Environment. For some perspective on how the project was received, when we returned for our work this year, we were welcomed by the directors of the Institute of Culture and the National Service for Protected Area Management. There were very enthusiastic meetings at the U.S. embassy with their entire staff, including the Ambassador. They were very supportive and offered their service to us. So did the Foreign Ministry of Peru. So there is excellent support from high up and on the ground in the country by both governments.



Richard Tobin, Superintendent Jose Linnebrink, Assistant Secretary of State Claudia McMurray, US Ambassador Craig Kelly, and Marcelo Diaz (also of CVIP) at a ranger station in Torres del Paine. Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP.

The U.S. and Peru, and previously the U.S. and Chile, recently signed a free trade agreement. Part of the accord, which is often referred to as a sidebar agreement, addressed environmental cooperation. Both countries agreed to implement conservation measures to ensure that free trade occurred and was not to the detriment of the environment. Our project in Chile was the first project selected under the Environmental Cooperation Agreement to move forward and accomplish work on the ground. Chile, Peru and the U.S. are very excited about our work. Often, projects under the Environmental Cooperation Agreement are for studies, evaluation, or interchange of people. Ours is on-the-ground, getting work accomplished.

How many trips does Conservation VIP run per year? Do you plan to expand into any other nations?



University students joined US volunteers and park rangers in Santiago Metropolitan Parks, providing students with opportunity to learn about natural resource restoration. Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

We are currently running four to six trips each year. We plan to grow slowly, both in the number of trips and the locations in which we offer volunteer expeditions. We are adding a new project in Santiago's Metropolitan Parks District. This was a recommendation from the U.S. Ambassador to Chile in 2005, [Mr. Craig Kelly](#). Mr. Kelly was very excited about our work in Torres del Paine, but he also recognized that for many Chileans, Torres del Paine is very expensive and thus difficult to access. He

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suggested we try to offer a volunteer expedition in the heart of Santiago. We had our pilot project in March 2008, where we spent four days in Santiago restoring a trail that had been bifurcated by a new highway. Because of the success of that project, we have been invited back and now have a trip planned for a full week in Santiago this fall.

We also have discussions underway for national parks in Argentina and the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador. We are open to new locations where volunteers are needed. We've found that it takes at least two years to develop a volunteer project in the way that we believe is appropriate (including the community, businesses, etc.) Conservation VIP is not a tour operator who comes in and simply offers trips. It is, instead, a holistic approach to bring together volunteers to work with the community and national parks to help protect and restore international treasures.

In addition to volunteer trail and restoration work, Conservation VIP has provided other services to our host countries. For example, we have conducted two training courses in trail design, construction and maintenance, including a national training course for rangers from throughout Chile. We also gave a national training course in interpretation to learn how to communicate the important values of natural resources and conservation to park visitors. We have come in behind fire events and provided expert advice on emergency fire rehabilitation of fire burned area. We have provided emergency response and vertical rescue training.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

All the countries we visit are very eager for interchange between countries. We've done that in a couple of ways. We brought 10 rangers from Chile to the U.S. to tour national parks and forests. The focus of that interchange was voluntourism. We provided training on how to recruit, train and lead



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

volunteer activities within their national parks. We are also supporting the creation of sister parks. We suggested, nurtured and helped to create a sister park between Torres del Paine and Yosemite National Park, which resulted in interchange of rangers between both countries and now a direct communication channel. The superintendent of Torres del Paine can pick up the phone and call the

superintendent of Yosemite and seek advice on how to handle a fire, a challenge with a concessionaire, or other issues. We're helping to support the development of a sister park relationship between Mesa Verde National Park and Machu Picchu. We also supported the creation of a sister park agreement between San Francisco Metropolitan Parks and Santiago Metropolitan Park District. The interchange helps U.S. national parks as well. Our national parks are host to visitors from around the world. The better U.S. national park rangers are able to understand the international visitor, the better able we are to manage the parks for the world and not just U.S. visitors. These other kinds of services extend the support our organization offers these countries. It all goes back to our mission of building friends one kilometer at a time.

Can you talk me through the itinerary of one of your trips to give our readers a sense of what it's like to travel and volunteer with Conservation VIP?

In the case of Machu Picchu, we arrange everyone's international travel and flight into Cusco. We immediately travel by charter bus down into the Sacred Valley of the Incas into the community of [Ollantaytambo](#). This is a wonderful first stop. Ollantaytambo is probably the best-preserved, continuously occupied Inca village in Peru, dating back over 500 years. Many people consider it to be the second finest example Inca stone craftsmanship, after Machu Picchu. Once there, we relax and take it easy. We are up at 8,500 feet (2,792 m) in elevation, so we want visitors to rest after the long overnight flight and get used to the higher elevation.

The next day, we board a private bus with a local, professional guide who has been working in this region for years. We'll travel and visit the Sacred Valley of the Inca Empire, making many stops along the way. We'll visit archeological sites where our volunteers learn about the history, culture and craftsmanship of the Inca. Gaining a better understanding the construction techniques and the history and culture of the Inca people helps prepare us for our work assignments in Machu Picchu.

The next day, we'll visit the Machu Picchu Sanctuary, including a stop in the Sacred City. There, we'll learn about the ongoing projects, receive an orientation of the site and safety instruction. We'll also meet the local folks with whom we'll be working.

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For the next week, volunteers wake up in the morning, board a bus up to the Machu Picchu Sanctuary, and work on tasks that have been asked of us by the managing agencies. Those tasks include: removing exotic or unwanted vegetation along the trails, stone buildings and agricultural terraces; maintenance of the Inca Trail to shed water from the trail, control erosion or restore areas impacted by fire or visitor use; planting trees; monitoring restoration plots; and other work that may be assigned to us. This takes place all week.



*Volunteering on the Inca Trail.
Photo courtesy of
Conservation VIP.*

Volunteers self select the projects they do each day. We encourage our volunteers to change tasks



*Protecting walls built by the Incas.
Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP.*

every day so they get to do different kinds of work. Some people really enjoy taking a pair of loppers and cutting back vegetation on the trails. Others enjoy the more difficult work of trail reconstruction. Everyone enjoys spending time working on the Inca building walls that people are coming from around the world to see. We are working to protect and restore those areas by removing plants that are growing between the cracks. If those plants are not caught when they are small, the

Ministry of Culture actually has to disassemble the buildings and remove the plants and rebuild the structures, so our work is very important.

Is there one particular invasive plant that is causing problems?

There is an exotic grass species that sends very deep roots and is competing - all too successfully - with native grasses. This last trip, we spent time collecting native grass seeds, which will be replanted in areas to compete with these exotic species. They have found that reintroducing native species is a fairly successful way to naturally overcome the exotic plants.



Temple of the Condor, Machu Picchu, before & after restoration. Photos courtesy of Conservation VIP.

How have these exotics gotten into Machu Picchu?

A variety of means. Visitors coming through the area who have hiked elsewhere. There are also farm animals within the sanctuary. When food is brought in, sometimes exotics are brought in as well.

Does this week of volunteer work complete the trip?

After the week of volunteer activity, we usually spend some time in the community. Since we work every day with volunteers from the community and employees from the site, we get to know them. On the last trip, for example, the local rangers invited us to have lunch with them at their residence. There was also a festival in town to which we were invited.

After our time in Aguas Calientes, we take the train back to Cusco, where we have a city tour and then free time for exploration and shopping. The next day, we leave for Lima, where we go on a tour of colonial sites and the modern city. In Lima, we learn more about Peru as a whole. We'll often meet with local leadership from the Peruvian and U.S. governments to get a bigger perspective on Peru and our work. We'll have our final meal at [La Rosa Nautica](#), which is a wonderful restaurant on a pier overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's the best restaurant I've ever eaten in. We are often joined by representatives from the Peruvian and U.S. governments, who share their thanks for our work.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

Where do your volunteers stay while they're working.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

On our international trips we stay in local hotels when available. While in the Torres del Paine backcountry, we stay in mountain lodges called refugios. For our US-based trips, we camp. Because we have relationships with local businesses, we receive discounted rates for hotels, food and transportation services. We're able to pass these discounts on to our volunteers to make it less expensive for them to stay. The

accommodations are nice. Every night, we eat fabulous food at local restaurants as a group. One of the volunteers on our last trip said, "I'd come on this trip again just for the food!"

What is the average length of your trips?

Our current trips run two weeks in length. That includes travel. In the case of Santiago Metropolitan Park and Yosemite, those will be one-week volunteer projects.

What is the average cost of one of your trips?

Our two-week trips (Torres del Paine and Machu Picchu) cost \$3,600. That is all-inclusive, including international and domestic airfare, room, board, local transportation, training, park entrance, boats, and buses. Everything but the Pisco Sour! (That's the national beverage in Chile and Peru. Pisco is a grape brandy. It's mixed with lemon juice and sugar. The Pisco Sour is like a margarita, but much better.)

The weeklong trip in Santiago is tentatively priced at \$1,800. That will include international airfare, transfers, lodging, food and training. We'll also have time to explore Santiago and vicinity.

Our weeklong project in Yosemite National Park is offered in collaboration with the [American Hiking Society](#). The cost for that trip is \$275. There is no transportation included in this trip. The cost includes the campsite, all of the food, and contribution toward the tools and leadership and guidance from Conservation VIP and the National Park Service.

Where does that money go?

We are an all-volunteer organization. There are no salaries. No paid employees. All of the costs paid by volunteers go into transportation, food, lodging, tool purchase, and guide services to help the local communities.

Do you find that cost is a barrier to people interested in your trips?

Yes. A recent [study on voluntourism](#), addresses that. Cost is a barrier to participation in international trips in particular. When potential volunteers ask me about that, I say, "Yes. There is an expense because volunteers pay their own costs for travel, backcountry lodges, hotels, transfers, food, and so on. Those are real costs. We attempt to minimize those costs through strategic alliances with businesses."



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

The other way I encourage potential volunteers to look at cost is this: if you wanted to go to Machu Picchu, this is an excellent value. If you were already prepared to pay for the travel and expenses to be a tourist in Machu Picchu, then participating as a volunteer is less expensive and more meaningful.

Through our program, participants may also be eligible for a tax-deductible donation for their out-of-pocket expenses. Current tax code allows individuals to deduct donations to qualified organizations. Conservation VIP is a 501c3 nonprofit organization, so volunteers who participate in our trips may be able to consider their out-of-pocket expenses a tax-deductible donation. Everyone's situation is different, so we recommend that volunteers discuss this with their tax advisor.

Do you have a lot of repeat travelers?

Yes. Probably about 10-15% of volunteers will repeat, either the same expedition or another.

Is there such a thing as the typical Conservation VIP volunteer? If so, describe him/her.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

What they all have in common is a big heart; a willingness to give of themselves to make a difference. We have had volunteers as young as 19 up to as old as 90!

Volunteers are able to select the kind of work they want to do, so as long as they have the willingness to get up and do their best, that's the most important aspect. We describe the work well in advance so people

know what they're getting into. Generally, people need to be physically fit. We say, if you can be out in the garden all day long or hike with a daypack

that carries your food, water and a raincoat, you can sign up for one of our trips. We provide all the training that is required, so no prior experience is necessary.

Would you classify your business as eco-voluntourism or cultural voluntourism?

I wouldn't put Conservation VIP in either camp. It's a mixture, and I think that's the success of our programs. We blend working with others from around the world - that cultural interchange - with accomplishing restoration work on the ground.

Do you see these kinds of volunteer travel experiences as a growing trend in the industry?

Yes. A [recent survey](#) indicated that 61% of ecotourism providers see growth in this area. The opportunity to not just be a tourist, but actually give back by participating in worthwhile project is increasingly an incentive for visitors to travel with a voluntourism objective. I do see this area of voluntourism growing in the years to come.

Has the economic situation impacted enrollment in your trips?

I believe it has. The number of individuals who participated in the most recent trip is down. Many people who had expressed interest in our trips communicated to me that they needed to postpone their plans because of the economy. Speaking in a broader sense and speaking with service providers around the world, Peru, Chile, Argentina, China and Nepal all report significant declines in tourism, with some reporting a 40-50% decline in visitors over the last six months. They all cited the "world economic crisis" as the reason for the decline.

What do you think will pull Conservation VIP through?

As an all-volunteer organization, we have no direct expenses. There is no payroll to meet and no rent to pay. We're probably better positioned than many to sustain a temporary decline in enrollment.

What will ultimately sustain us is our commitment to help protect these World Heritage and World Biosphere sites to the best of our ability, and the generosity and support of local communities and their encouragement of us to return.

Are there some common misperceptions about eco-voluntourism - perhaps specific to the countries or areas in which you work - that you have to contend with?

Some individuals contact us and don't realize that they need to pay for their own travel. That's probably the largest misconception. We hope that donations from business, individuals and foundations will help further reduce volunteer costs. In the past we've offered scholarships to local citizens who participate. For example, we brought university students from Santiago to Torres del Paine one year.

What advice would you offer someone who is interested in experiencing eco-voluntourism? (How to find the best program for one's interests and needs; How to evaluate programs in terms of reliability, responsibility to people and land, safety, etc.)

My first response is, sign up with us! There is a great deal of information available on line. It'd be good to begin with a trusted organization like VolunTourism.org, whose Internet site helps potential volunteers get started [selecting a program and preparing for a trip](#). I'd also encourage people to look at a variety of opportunities and think about what they'd like to try. Someone first entering into this may want to try something close to home. For example, the [American Hiking Society](#) and [Appalachian Trail Club](#) offer great volunteer activities. People can also work in their own communities. With passage of the [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act](#) there should be a big push for volunteering here at home.

My advice is to try volunteering locally and see if you enjoy it before committing to a longer trip.

Is there one common, overarching benefit that your participants say they take away from their Conservation VIP experience?

The feeling that they have made a contribution; that they have given something back to help protect a World Heritage site. This gets back to that Margaret Mead quote. They feel that even as an individual in a small group, they were able to make a difference. They feel empowered and excited to go back and carry that same philosophy when they return home that they can make a difference. They want to stay engaged in their community or return for more trips.



Photo courtesy of Conservation VIP

One final anecdote for us?

When I was in Machu Picchu a couple of weeks ago, a visitor to the Sanctuary was walking by. We chatted for a few minutes and I explained

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what we were doing. He said, "Thank you for doing this. When you are doing this kind of volunteer work, these days are not subtracted from your life. These days are added to your life." I think that really sums up why we are here doing what we do.

Leaf Litter Talks with Sarah Kennedy

Outreach Director
Sustainable Harvest International



Sarah Kennedy is Outreach Director for [Sustainable Harvest International \(SHI\)](#), a non-profit organization that provides farming families in Central America with the training and tools to overcome poverty while restoring our planet's tropical forests. Fueled by a passion to create meaningful connections between people in the U.S. and the communities served by SHI's programs, Sarah established [SHI's Smaller World program](#). This unique program provides the incredible opportunity to directly support SHI's work and meet the people the organization serves by taking part in service-oriented trip.

In addition to traveling with many of the Smaller World groups, Sarah oversees the organization's publications, media outreach and coordinates events. Before joining SHI, Sarah served as a volunteer coordinator for a small Nicaraguan organization specializing in service learning and rural sustainable development.

For anyone who is not familiar with Sustainable Harvest International, can you tell us a little about the organization?



Photo courtesy of SHI

Sustainable Harvest International was founded in 1997 by Florence Reed, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Panama. SHI works with farming communities in Central America. We have programs in Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua and Panama. We hire local staff and provide hands-on training in a variety of techniques that families use to improve their quality of living while restoring the natural environment.

Our local staff members are really the key to the great deal of success we've had in a relatively short time. We have been around as an organization for just 11 years now, but in that amount of time we have worked with 1,800 families in 123 communities. It's been great for me to see the organization grow since I first started. We now have 48 local field staff - we call them Field Trainers or Extension Agents - in Central America. We have seven staff members handling administrative support, development and outreach here in the U.S.

That brings us to your role as Outreach Director. What is your background, and what do you do at SHI?

I have a degree in Spanish and International Relations from the University of Maine and the University of Costa Rica in San Jose. I grew up on a farm in Maine, but I have learned a lot about agriculture - especially tropical agriculture - through SHI. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to be involved with hands-on agricultural work through the organization.

I've been working with SHI for six years. I started with development and fundraising and then had the opportunity to move into education and outreach. My passion is to build awareness about our programs to address poverty and deforestation and educate people here in the United States about opportunities to get involved with the work we are doing in Central America.

As Outreach Director, I do a variety of educational outreach programs here in the U.S., including speaking engagements and events. I work very closely with our publications coordinator to raise awareness about our programs through newsletters, our web site, email updates, etc. I'm currently working on a short documentary about our program in Honduras. In addition to that, I started and oversee our Smaller World program.

What led you to start the Smaller World program?

As an organization, we are dedicated to keeping our administrative overhead as low as possible. We have a small group of core supporters, and we wanted to provide opportunities for these donors to go down and see our work in person. We believe it was important for us to be able to say, for example, "your \$50 donation represents the amount of materials and staff support that go into building a wood-conserving stove for one of the families with whom we're working in Central America." We wanted them to be able to see that stove and actually meet the families, if they wanted to. So, initially, the program was an opportunity to demonstrate our work to the people who are supporting it, but it has grown to be much more than that.

The Smaller World program is now no longer just for people who are currently supporting our work. We see it as a way to reach out to people who may not have heard of us and expose them to our programs through an alternative vacation opportunity. It has grown to be much more than an opportunity for people to go down and see donations at work. It's now an opportunity for people to get involved and get their hands dirty through meaningful volunteer opportunities. Our hope is that participants are returning to their home communities and being our SHI ambassadors all over the country. We have a very small staff here in the U.S., so we really depend on people who have taken part in our Smaller World tours to share what they learn with their communities when they return home.



SHI volunteers in the rice paddies of Panama. Photo courtesy of SHI.

How did the Smaller World program transition from demonstrating your work to supporters to providing people with an opportunity to combine their interests in ecology, volunteerism and travel to interesting places?

A lot of it came from the feedback we got from the families with whom we were working. They were very excited to have people come and see the work in person. It means a great deal to them. Realistically, in Central America, there is plenty of manpower available, but working side-by-side to, say, plant a garden with people you know have come a long way and are genuinely interested in the project provides a great deal of encouragement and enthusiasm in the communities we work with. The local staff and families were really excited by the first Smaller World trips. They requested more volunteer assistance. Since then, we've had an outpouring of interest. It began with the first groups of supporters and then branched out from there. A lot of individual travelers will contact us, but we also have many school groups, community groups and congregations. People learn about us through word of mouth, or by researching on line.

It sounds like there is a not a typical Smaller World traveler, then. Is that true?



Photo courtesy of SHI

Initially, we had a lot of student groups. I really like working with the students, particularly those of high school age. They have so much enthusiasm and you can really see the lasting impacts that these trips have on high school students from the U.S. who go to rural Central America and have personal interactions with the host families. It is a life-changing experience for them.

But we work with people of all ages. We have an Elderhostel group, for example, that's going to be coming to Belize. We have college students who are working on business or micro-finance who are interested in helping our families with marketing. We have families who want to do something a little different for their vacations and expose their children to a different way of life.



Photo courtesy of SHI

SHI works to alleviate poverty while restoring the environment. What are some of the threats to the tropical rainforests in the areas where you're working?

In the areas where we work, the traditional form of agriculture is called "slash and burn" farming. Historically, slash and burn farming worked well. Small groups of families would clear an area of forest, burn the trees and use the ash as a fertilizer for their crops. The family would plant their crops on that piece of land for one or two growing seasons. But in the tropics, there are heavy rains, and without root systems of the trees that were once there, the ash and the topsoil quickly erode away. At this point the family would move on, clear another section of forest and repeat the process.

The system of slash and burn is dependent on low population growth and large tracts of forest available to burn and replenish the soil. But what we're finding is that with more than half of Central America's forest destroyed by agricultural expansion, the most impoverished families are left with very little land to farm. This system is no longer working for them.

The big tracts of land in flat areas have been bought up by large businesses. Small and impoverished farmers are being forced onto steep hillsides and very small pieces of land. They're still trying to practice the same techniques of slash and burn farming, and it's not working for them anymore. Families desperate to provide food for their children are abandoning their land

looking for new pieces of forest to burn or migrating to dangerous urban slums.

Many families are coming to SHI and asking for support because they want to stay on the land and restore what little is left of the natural environment. They want to learn techniques that they can use to grow food on one piece of land year after year without needing to destroy the forest which protects their watersheds and provides valuable resources to their communities.



Photo courtesy of SHI

What are some of the techniques your field trainers are teaching to local farmers?

Typically, our field trainers work with an individual family for about five years on their land. Initially, we look at basic needs. To begin addressing family nutrition, they help families to grow small vegetable gardens.

They also work to help families transition from growing staple crops - things like corn, rice, beans and coffee - using slash and burn to something more sustainable. They teach things like making compost, mulching techniques and small scale crop rotation. We do a lot with agro-forestry projects as well, where you plant an upper story of hardwood trees for long-term crops like mahogany and rosewood; a middle story of crops like coffee, cacao and plantain; and a lower story of different spices like vanilla, cardamom, etc. That way, they have a great diversity of different crops that they're able to sell and use to feed their family.



Photo courtesy of SHI



Photo courtesy of SHI

Is the historical slash and burn farming technique the main ecological threat you're addressing in all four countries?

Slash and burn is the big one. Agricultural expansion in general is the leading cause for deforestation in Central America and throughout most of the tropics. But it's all really a cycle. You have families who have been practicing slash and burn whose

land isn't productive anymore so they've moved. Maybe they are tenant farmers, and they've been removed from their land. Maybe the land owner has come in with cattle and they're growing grass there. Families are being pushed further and further to an economically impoverished situation, so we're really looking at both of those situations together. If families can meet their basic needs, they really are dedicated to improving and protecting the environment.

The combination of poverty with large scale deforestation leads to many other side problems, like malnutrition, poor education programs, and water contamination. One of the challenges of SHI's work - but also one of the benefits - is that our mission includes a variety of projects. The scope of the programs in each community is defined by goals that the individual family members are setting with the field trainer that is working with them.

So in that initial year, they are looking at transitioning from slash and burn to more sustainable methods for their basic crops like corn, beans and coffee. Moving on from there, they are looking at diversifying their growing and doing some small scale projects like building a wood-conserving stove, which reduces the amount of trees that need to be cut down for firewood, but also really improves the health conditions of the women and children who spend a lot of time in the home where they just have an open fireplace. Those open fireplaces produce toxic smoke and soot that studies have shown are equivalent to smoking as many as eight packs of cigarettes a day! You can image the health implications that would have on a household.



Photo courtesy of SHI

Our programs include many different projects that vary depending on the needs of individual families and communities. One challenge we face as an organization is explaining our holistic approach to funders here in the U.S. Many foundations want to fund only one type of project. Our local staff members look at a wide variety of issues that might be impacting a community. Through sustainable agriculture, we're able to tie it all together.



Photo courtesy of SHI

Can you describe a typical Smaller World trip?

During our typical ten-day trip, our first day is a travel and orientation day, where the volunteers will go out and meet with the families they'll be working with throughout the week, see the project in person, and get an

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overview of the scope of SHI's work in that community. They get to interact with the families.

We encourage our travelers to do home stays where they actually share meals and spend additional time with the families and make some real, personal connections. Then, our volunteers work on local farms for most of the week.

Usually, on the last two days of the trip, we do some kind of R&R or sightseeing. We do a mix of volunteer activities, cultural activities, and some fun excursions at the end.



Photo courtesy of SHI



Photo courtesy of SHI

If you ask people what their favorite aspect of the trip is, overwhelmingly, it's the personal connections with the families and the volunteer projects. Most people don't even get around to talking about hiking to the waterfall or exploring the Mayan ruins. It's good for our travelers to decompress at the end of the trip and it's good to see another part of the country or be exposed to another culture, but

most groups say they're interested in spending more time in their new host community than doing the tourist thing.

What are some of the trips SHI has planned for the coming months?

We have trips in all four countries coming up. I'd recommend the Family Voluntourism trip for anyone who has children and is looking for an opportunity to expose their kids to service work and an alternative to Disneyworld or watching Sponge Bob all summer. This is a family-oriented trip where our groups stay at Cotton Tree Lodge in Belize. We have a great [partnership with Cotton Tree Lodge](#). They have been very generous in their support of our work in the communities around their lodge. They also host the SHI-Belize demonstration and training garden right at the lodge. We bring staff from the lodge as well as families from the surrounding communities to the lodge to see the work in person. If a family only has a small piece of land, they've only been growing one crop on that land for generations, they're no longer making any money, and we encourage them to diversify, then that can be very scary. Our local field trainers invite these families to the demonstration garden where they can see the techniques we're teaching on land similar to their own. Workshops and demonstrations provide the families with the training and confidence they need to try something new.



Photo courtesy of SHI

In Panama, we have an educator's workshop coming up. We'll have teachers from other parts of the world come together and help with volunteer projects during the mornings. Then in the afternoons, we'll have workshops around curriculum development programs that we can implement in Central America and they can go home and work on in their own school communities.

We have lots of trips coming up that do not have a specific focus. Volunteers will take part in a variety of projects, ranging from gardening to tree planting to building wood-conserving stoves.

Other trips may be more defined. We're hoping to do a beekeeping workshop in Honduras. The donation amount of the volunteers' program fees will go toward providing materials for building hives and beekeeping supplies for the families. Then there will be a training workshop for the volunteers and the host community on beekeeping skills, honey-making, different products that can be made from wax, etc. That trip comes from a specific community in Honduras that would like to do something with beekeeping but doesn't currently have the ability to do so.

So SHI can actually customize trips to address specific needs that different communities might have?

All of the projects that our volunteers work on are projects that the communities have specifically requested. The funds to make those projects possible come from the program fees that participants pay to go on the trip.

Do you have hotel/lodge partnerships similar to your arrangement with Cotton Tree Lodge in the other countries in which you have programs?

Our partnership with Cotton Tree Lodge is unique among our country programs. The rural districts outside of Toledo, Belize, where we work do not have eco-lodges located in the communities. Cotton Tree Lodge is dedicated to protecting the cultural and natural beauty of the surrounding communities and makes a wonderful partner for our local program. In the other countries, we have rustic dormitories and home stay opportunities. Volunteers actually stay with a host family in a small group and then you come together as a larger group to take part in tourism and volunteer projects during the day.

Your trips have economic, cultural, public health, social and environmental components. Are most of your travelers interested in just one of those areas?



Photo courtesy of SHI

Initially, yes. They are usually most interested in one aspect of our work. One of the really nice things I've found in working with our volunteer groups, though, is that they come away with a broader understanding and greater appreciation of how all of these aspects fit together and how there

are interconnected cycles of poverty, deforestation and malnutrition. Simply by empowering local people to make changes within their own community, we're seeing some solutions to these issues.

[Before people sign up for our trips] we ask them why they want to volunteer. Is it because they want that nice, warm feeling inside from doing something to help others? Is it because they feel like they can make an impact on our planet? We ask them to think about what the impact of a trip like this would be. The cost of one of our typical ten-day, rustic trips to Honduras is just over \$1,000. Once you add in take care of immunizations, plane tickets and passports, people will be spending close to \$2,000 for a vacation during which they will be volunteering. What would the real benefit

be if they just donated that funding to an organization like ours? We ask our volunteers to think about that. Our hope is that the impact of them seeing the work in person and having a personal connection to our program will be tenfold. Perhaps when they return, they'll do a fundraiser or give a presentation for their local school or congregation.

Cost is such a barrier to this kind of trip for so many people. How does the cost of a Smaller World trip compare to the cost of a leisure or ecotourism trip to similar destinations?

As far as other service trips offered by other organizations, we are very competitive and usually less expensive than other options. Something to keep in mind is that we donate at least 20% of the program fee directly to the local partner organization we're working with: Sustainable Harvest Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua or Panama program. What we ask of them is that they use these funds as they best see fit within the boundaries of our mission, and we ask that the volunteers get to participate in the way the funds are used so they can see their donations in action.



Photo courtesy of SHI

Whether it's buying some chimneys for wood-conserving stoves that the group helps construct, purchasing some chicken wire for an animal husbandry project, or buying tree seedlings that the group will plant, the travelers get to hear about how the funds are being spent when they get home and get updates on the projects they took part in.

Our trips really do not compare to your typical, tropical vacation. We're off the beaten path and interacting with local communities. Because of the nature of the areas that we're in, you don't see a lot of tourist accommodations. This is something we're also very aware of. We want to make sure that the tourist dollars that we are bringing into these communities are staying in the communities and helping them to establish sustainable tourism opportunities. After hosting our group of volunteers, maybe they can host another group of tourists in the future.

Where does the remaining 80% of SHI's program fee go?

We seek out the most remote areas that are in need of our assistance. We look for areas where there is the greatest demonstration of need and also the ability to work within our organization and our programs. So we are in areas where, typically, there aren't any other organizations - government or nongovernment. So in-country transportation can be a major aspect of the

cost. For example, once you arrive in Managua, Nicaragua we fly you out to Bluefields, which is a port city on the Caribbean coast, across the country. From there, getting into our area of Nicaragua can involve traveling by mule or small boat deep into the jungle.

Administrative support is a small portion - about 10% - of the program fee. Then there is staff support. We always have a trip leader coming with the group. All meals, accommodations and tours are also included. People can bring a little bit of money for souvenirs, but really everything is taken care of with the program fee.

Have you seen any change in enrollment in recent months, with the fragile economic situation?

It's something we have been paying very close attention to, but we have seen a continual increase in interest in our programs. The types of groups that are already organized and want to do these kinds of trips, like congregations and schools, are still doing them. Most of these groups are fundraising to cover their trip expenses. They may be working harder to meet their fundraising goals, but they are still meeting them and still interested in doing these trips. Family groups and people who are interested in this as an alternative vacation, still seem to be traveling. I think there is a growing interest in these sorts of travel opportunities. We currently have more interest in these trips than we are able to staff.

In 2004, we did two trips. I was just working on projections for the next fiscal year and I think we are going to do 22 trips. We have a lot of school groups, summer camps, etc. that may do every other year.

For people for whom cost is a barrier, does SHI help with fundraising?

While we don't directly have a scholarship program, SHI is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and our program fees are tax-deductible, as is any donation to SHI for our core program. A lot of our groups get business sponsorships. A lot of people work for a company that has a corporate giving or company match program. That can be very helpful. A lot of the student groups are able to apply for scholarships. We are also able to suggest fundraising and event ideas.

Does SHI offer participants any fundraising tools, such as print materials, a web site where supporters can donate on line, etc?

People making contributions toward someone's trip can certainly go to the regular [donation link on our web site](#) and add a note in the comment section. We have a list of suggested fundraising ideas. For us, as an

organization, it's really a win-win. When someone is holding a fundraising event, it's really an awareness building event for us as well. People will do a fundraising dinner, show a video or presentation, car washes, bake sales, fun runs. We are definitely available to help brainstorm some of those activities and provide literature and materials.

If someone is able to get the funds together to take a trip like this, what is the return on investment for the traveler, the community, the planet and SHI?



SHI volunteers help at the El Rosario school garden in Honduras. Photo courtesy of SHI.

That's a difficult question, because so many of the benefits are intangible. As far as tangible results, we've raised literally thousands of dollars for our programs in Central America from the donation portion of the program fee. Those have gone toward planting gardens, building stoves, doing reforestation projects, irrigation projects, and any number projects our volunteers have gotten involved in.

In addition to that, among people who were already supporting our programs, we see a significant increase in the donations they give to the organization when they return home. I think a lot of that has to do with the personal connections they've made and knowing the funds can be given directly to the community they've been involved with. They also know they can trust the organization to carry out the work. They are seeing how the money is invested in the local communities. That has certainly been beneficial in terms of a return on investment for the organization.

For the communities we're working with, the feedback we have received from them is that it's been a huge boost of morale for them. It really means a lot to the families to have people come and volunteer and stay with them and see what their lives are like in Central America.

Environmentally, all of the programs are having a significant impact - both locally, for the communities who are depending on the local environment for food, shelter and all of their resources, and on a larger scale. As a planet, we're very dependent on the tropical forests in Central America. They're sort of the lungs of our planet and provide us all with the clean air we depend on. Our tropical forests mitigate climate change, protect watersheds, and provide habitat for plants and animals.

Have you ever attempted to quantify the ecological benefits/results of your programs?

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We have planted in excess of two million trees in Central America with our families and volunteer groups. We just completed an official carbon survey that shows that we sequestered 73,425 pounds of carbon from our tree planting efforts alone. We have converted 9,000 acres of land to sustainable uses, thereby saving more than 45,000 acres from slash and burn destruction. Our local staff estimates that for every one acre of land that is converted to a sustainable form of agriculture, they're saving approximately five acres from slash and burn. We've built over 700 wood-conserving stoves, and we estimate that that has saved more than 7,000 trees.

On SHI's web site, there is a page devoted to stories and testimonials from the field. In your experience running these trips, is there a story that stands out that illustrates the intangible return on investment of your trips?

I have so many stories. In February, we were working in a community near the larger town of Trinidad in the department of Santa Barbara in Honduras. I was with a women's group from D.C. area. One of the projects they were involved with was helping the families to make bokachi, which is a Japanese form of compost made by fermenting ingredients. The women in this community had very little land; most of them do not own their property, and the land that they did have was on ledge slopes with little or no top soil to speak of. The local field trainer, Roy Lara, was working with them to build raised beds filled with bokachi compost.



Photo courtesy of SHI



Photo courtesy of SHI

These women knew that we were coming, and in preparation, they had harvested used bean stalked, coffee pulp, sugar cane, and all these materials to make the compost with, and hauled it to their location. Our volunteers were able to help mix the materials, build up raised beds, and do some planting. We also got involved in a community reforestation project where we planted tree seedlings with local school

children around the village watershed.

I just received some current photos of that area, and it looks beautiful. We went from seeing this ledge hillside where nothing was growing to these beautiful gardens full of tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers and many other vegetables the families didn't have access to before. Now they're able to harvest them, eat them, and sell them locally. The women's group from D.C. is planning to go back next year. One of the women just turned 65, and she asked all of her friends and family to make a contribution to support the ongoing work in that community as a birthday gift to her. We're seeing donations coming in already.



A local woman's first vegetable garden planted with support from Smaller World Volunteers in Feb 2009. Photo courtesy of SHI.

That's a great story and a great example of how incorporating eco-voluntourism into an organization's programs can create a widespread, growing cadre of ambassadors. Are you sharing this strategy with other non-profits who have programs in other parts of the world?

One experience I've had to be able to share this has been through the [Changemaker Geotourism Challenge](#), a competition hosted by Changemakers, National Geographic and Ashoka. They set up a web site where you can write a proposal about what you're doing and view what other organizations are doing. (Check out [SHI's entry in the Geotourism Challenge](#))

What would you say to a potential trip participant who is worried about safety?

I get lots of calls about safety, usually from parents of kids who are traveling. I explain that I am down there by myself regularly and have never experienced anything that would be more dangerous than traveling anywhere else, including the U.S. Most importantly, it's essential to let people know that we have been invited to come to these communities, and families really do treat us as honored guests. The local staff members take good care of us and welcome us into their homes and communities. We have long-standing relationships in these communities and only go to areas where the villagers have requested our presence and support.

What is one of the key lessons you have learned since starting the Smaller World program over five years ago?

That personal connections are invaluable.



Photo courtesy of SHI

I give presentations about our work all over the country. I send out grant proposals. I work on all sorts of fundraising techniques. I'm always telling people about our work. But nothing compares to having someone see the programs in person. From talking to the families who are growing cacao...to meeting women whose lives have been changed by having a stove in their house so they no longer have to spend hours each day collecting firewood and aren't breathing

toxic smoke throughout the day while they cook food or their families ...to meeting kids who say they pay better attention in school now that they have a full stomach ...to parents who tell you that their kids are going to be the first generation in their family to go to high school because their family is able to sell a watermelon crop for the first time. That hands-on experience is invaluable, as far as educational outreach for our organization.

Does SHI have any plans to expand its mission and Smaller World program to other parts of the world?

We have a huge waiting list of families that would like to work with us - within and outside of the countries in which we're working. With the model that we use as an organization, all of our programs in Central America are moving towards becoming independent affiliates of Sustainable Harvest International.

Honduras, for example, is our longest running program. They're now an independent NGO called Sustainable Harvest Honduras (Fundacion Cosecha Sostenible Hondurano in Spanish). They have their own, independent board of directors, and they're making their programming decisions locally. Their board of directors is made up of local community leaders and people who have graduated from our program and have seen success. While they're still receiving funding from the international organization, as they become more independent, our hope is that we will be able to spread our resources to new areas, in Central America and eventually in other parts of the world as well.

What advice do you have for people who might be interested in combining volunteerism with tourism and an interest in the environment? How do you recommend someone find a program that's most appropriate?

Do your research. If you're looking at partnering with a non-profit organization, I recommend looking at web sites that rate organizations on their administrative overhead, costs, etc. [Charity Navigator](#) is a good one.

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Look for an organization that meets what you're looking for as a volunteer and as a traveler. Look for an organization that is working in a part of the world that you've always wanted to visit or an organization that is doing the type of work you've always had an interest in.

Our trip participants come from all over the country and have a wide variety of backgrounds ranging from people with experience in agriculture to others who might want to take meaningful vacation with their grandchildren. We had a computer programmer who works in an office all day long and may have never hammered a nail or planted a garden but really wanted to do something different on his vacation. He told me afterwards that traveling and volunteering in Central America was one of the most rewarding experiences of his life. Even if you don't know anything about agriculture, that shouldn't limit you from taking part in one of our projects. At least with our organization, you don't have to have any hands on experience because we provide the training and tools. You just need to bring your enthusiasm and an open mind.



Photo courtesy of SHI

Leaf Litter Talks with Jeff Pzena Business Manager, Cotton Tree Lodge Toledo District, Belize

Jeff Pzena has always had an interest in how things are made. After graduating from the University of Chicago he moved to Cambridge, MA where he started a beer and wine-making hobby shop and then opened a micro brewery with his own label, Fat Cat Beer. While living in Massachusetts, Jeff met Chris Crowell, the future founder of Cotton Tree Lodge. Jeff returned to school for his MBA, writing the business plan for Cotton Tree Lodge while still earning his degree. After graduating, Jeff spent a few years in the corporate world as a brand manager for Nabisco, then began consulting for Cotton Tree Lodge which quickly evolved into a partnership with Chris Crowell.



Jeff became interested in chocolate in 2004 on one of his trips to Belize. He bought what he thought was a bag of almonds in the local farmers market and discovered that they were cocoa beans. He made some crude chocolate that trip and on return trips to Belize, Jeff's interest in chocolate grew. After establishing a tour for guests to a local cacao farm, Jeff established a partnership between Cotton Tree Lodge and Sustainable Harvest International to offer an eco-voluntourism experience packaged as a "Sustainable Chocolate Tour." These unique trips offer people an opportunity to help local farmers implement sustainable land use practices.

In addition to his responsibilities at the Lodge, Jeff has his own Fair Trade organic chocolate company, Cotton Tree Chocolate.

How long does it take people to get to Cotton Tree Lodge once they arrive in Belize?



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Typically, if you're going to Belize, you fly into Belize City. From there, you can take a local carrier to Punta Gorda. This flight can take anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour, depending on how many stops they need to make. It's like riding the local bus. Once people are in Punta Gorda, we have a driver who picks them up and takes them on a 15 minute drive to the banks of the Mojo River. Our boat meets them

there and the approach Cotton Tree Lodge from the Mojo River. It's a beautiful way to come in and it allows guests to get to know the area a bit.

Describe Cotton Tree Lodge, and tell us why it might appeal to someone interested in eco-voluntourism.

Cotton Tree Lodge is situated on the Mojo River in southern Belize. It sits on 100 acres of land. Historically, the front 20 acres was a mango, papaya and citrus farm that a retired Peace Corps worker had farmed in his retirement. The back is all rainforest, and we pretty much kept it that way. We still have the mango and citrus. We have 11 cabanas for our guests, one lodge building and a restaurant. We also have an organic



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

demonstration garden. We are catering towards people who want to have a nice, relaxing vacation but also on-site activities and tours of the surrounding area. We have kayaks, horses, bicycles and trails. We also take people on trips. We are in a fairly remote area. There is just rainforest and a few farmers. It is not developed for tourism by any means. Once our guests are with us, we are taking care of them.

Tell me more about how your demonstration garden is used.

We worked with [Sustainable Harvest International \(SHI\)](#) to set up a demonstration garden to show local farmers how to farm sustainably and organically.

SHI runs monthly workshops where they'll invite farming families in to show them techniques. We also get a lot of the produce for our restaurant out of the garden.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

What prompted you to connect with SHI?



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

We were working with a local farm owner, Juan Cho and his mother, Cyrilla, on a very casual basis, mainly because I was curious about how to make chocolate. I arranged to go to Cyrilla's house so she could show me how to make chocolate. In talking to her, I realized that a lot of our guests would be interested in something like that, too. I asked if she'd like to set up a tour where we'd bring our guests over and she

could show them how to make chocolate. That was really the beginning of this whole area of cultural tourism we started to explore. We found that people really appreciate a connection with someone from another culture in an informal environment - not a lecture. It's a participatory thing. You get to make chocolate with a woman in her kitchen and meet her kids. People love that. We found that guests not only loved the experience, but afterwards, they wanted to do more for the community.

This is what led us to partner with Sustainable Harvest International and set up something a little more formal. The first chocolate tour we did with SHI was intended to show their donors what was happening with their contributions. It slowly has evolved and has taken on a life of its own. We've learned that people are very interested in volunteering, and they want it to be a personal experience. What started with this little chocolate connection has developed into what we call our [Sustainable Chocolate Tour](#).

What typically happens on the Sustainable Chocolate tour?

The first night is a chance for all of the tour participants to meet each other, our staff, representatives from SHI and people from the community. The groups are usually fairly small, from four to 12 people.

On the next day, after breakfast, we take the participants to visit a local, organic farm or cacao plantation. This first day is similar to what we had started with Juan Cho, where we tour the cacao orchard with him and spend some time in his mother's house. He talks with the guests, explaining how he started his farm, his relationship with SHI, and what it means to him to have learned organic farming. He also shows the group how cacao is harvested. Then we go to his mom's house for lunch. While she's cooking, we sit around with her family and talk. We get to see the way Mayan people use the chocolate in their daily lives and learn how it is processed.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

How is cacao harvested and processed into chocolate?



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Basically, you harvest the pod, scoop out the insides, and stick all the seeds, which are covered in fleshy fruit, in an open air box for fermentation. You turn it a couple of times a day for about a week. Before it is fermented, it's called "cacao." Once it's no longer a viable plant, it's called "cocoa." After a week, most of the fruit has separated from the cocoa beans. Then it is spread out and sun dried for about a week. The beans are stored, fermented and dried. You can roast them when you are ready to use them. Mayan people roast them on an aluminum plate, traditionally over an open fire. So while our guests sit with Juan Cho's mom, she'll be roasting the beans over the fire and turning them with her hands. We'll crush the beans with a matape, which is like a mortar and pestle. It is ground into a paste, and the paste is formed into balls. The balls are then stored. (In Mayan areas, you'll find these chocolate balls everywhere.) From there, you can grate the chocolate off of the balls and make drinks with it. So on that first day, our guests get to see how Mayan people interact with cocoa, in the growing of it and using it in their daily lives.

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Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Tell me about the cacao fruit.

The fruit is incredible, and it tastes nothing like chocolate. The cacao pods grow right off the trunk of the tree as well as its branches. It's kind of creepy looking. The pods are kind of like a mini Nerf ball. In the inner cavity, there are about 30-50 seeds. The seeds are covered in a gooey, fleshy fruit. You can suck on the seeds and get the fruit off. The taste is something between a peach and a mango. That's always a shock; this sweet, tart thing tastes nothing like chocolate.

Back to the chocolate tour itinerary...

On the next day, SHI will take our guests to another farm that is just being set up. There, they will do a lot of work. They may prepare seed beds, take cacao pods and put seeds into soil, and set up seed bags in a nursery. If the rainy season is starting, they may transplant seed bags into the ground. Our guests may plant up to 1,000 saplings on an acre or two of land. There is usually another day devoted to another project that will help farmers. An example might be building a stove. These stoves use a lot less wood and create a lot less smoke than the traditional, open fire stove.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge



Photos courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

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Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

After working all day, people usually come back to Cotton Tree Lodge and relax. They may go for a swim in the river, for example.

Our guests will also have a day to get a feel for other things SHI does to help local farm families. For example, if SHI is working with a family on their garden, our guests might get to help harvest stuff from the rainforest that can be used as a natural, organic herbicide. They

might also get to see progress that SHI has made with other families or other places in the communities. They might see a seed bank SHI developed for a community. They might visit a garden that SHI set up at a school to start teaching children about sustainable, organic gardening.

The next day, the guests will get to complete the project they started two days earlier. So if they were building a stove, they would actually complete the stove on that day.

Toward the end of the trip, the guests usually get to do something fun, like hike to the Rio Blanco Waterfalls or go caving. We have taken people to Tiger Cave, which is really wild. There are rooms in there that are like cathedrals. The Mayan people are, in general, frightened of caves. They do not go in.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

So the caves are pristine. You might even find shards of pottery when you're walking through. The ancient Mayan people would make jars and sit them inside the cave and allow water to drip in them for years. Then royalty would come and drink from these pots the water that took years to fill.

In a situation like that, or in another situation where you're taking your guests into a pristine area, how much education is involved so that your guests don't end up spoiling that? Do their experiences over the previous few days help instill in them a respect for the local culture and history?



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

The experiences definitely help. In any situation where we're going into a cave, or someone's home, or somewhere where we want people to be aware of how they are affecting the environment, we never take groups of more than eight people. If we have more than eight people, we split them into groups. We also use local guides, so they help gently guide our guests so that they can enjoy the experience in a way that is respectful to the culture and the environment.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Does that day or two of fun round out the Sustainable Chocolate Tour experience?

One more thing that often happens is that our guests get to see the final end of the chocolate process. After the beans are fermented and dried, they are sold to the first fair trade organic cocoa coop in the world, in Punta Gorda. It is called the [Toledo Cacao Growers Association](#). We'll take our guests

into town to meet with representatives from the Association, who explain the history of the cacao market in Belize. So our guests get to learn about the politics and economics of cacao in the world market. While we're in town, we usually take people to the farmer's market, too.

Anything scary in the river?

No. No crocodiles. No piranhas. You can very safely swim all the time. It's beautiful. To go out there when no one is around, say at midnight, for a starlit swim, is incredible.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

How is business these days?

As the U.S. economy started to crash, our bookings completely crashed for about five months. It was getting scary. But since then, January, February, March, April and May have been great. June looks good. We have gotten a number of bookings for next year as well. About 15% of 2010 already sold out.

We work with a lot of groups. We work with [Elderhostel](#), and other large organizations that like to offer their members intimate trips. Elderhostel is an organization that offers educational travel for people over the age of 55. We also work with [Tom Brown Jr.' Tracking School](#). His area of expertise is wilderness survival. We do yoga retreats, college groups, and many other groups.

What percent of your bookings come from SHI's Smaller World program?

Probably in the 5-10% range.

Obviously, partnering with a reputable non-profit organization or other group is a smart move for the organization, as they get to build ambassadors, they know they have a nice place to stay, etc. Beyond providing 10-15% of your business and exposing you to potentially new markets, how has your partnership with SHI been a good move for Cotton Tree Lodge?

There is a direct benefit. We have a great garden now!

But there are also a lot of indirect benefits. Partnering with reputable organizations gives us a sort of stamp of approval. With SHI, it lets people know that we operate in this location according to their standards of sustainability.

We are also starting to develop a direct relationship with some of the farmers. I've even started my own little chocolate company on the side. I have a friend who, along with his brother, owns [Mast Brothers Chocolate](#)

We're in the process of setting up a way to work together where they can get direct access to farmers so they can control the process. Most confection companies have to melt down chocolate that someone else manufactured from the cocoa beans. There are some companies that do the whole process from bean to bar. This takes it even a step further. Forget about bean to bar; let's start with the tree.

Has your partnership with SHI helped make the surrounding community more welcoming to your guests?

We were on pretty good ground to begin with. My partner, Chris Crowell, has owned this land for ten years. He was running a sailboat charter business out of Punta Gorda. He got to know the area and the people. He hired the man who had been the previous owner's caretaker, and became friendly with his family. Chris did not live on the property for the first five year, but every year, when he would come down, he would bring collections of clothing and other items for the people in the town. He got to know people in the community. Jose, the caretaker, helped us recruit local people to help build the lodge. They all build their own houses. They are very simple structures, and we wanted to use that as our design anyway. So we had the community help us build our first cabana.

We also did something else that a lot of other foreign businesses fail to do. The Mayan community has a legal representation and a cultural representation. The village council is the political representation of the village in town. Then there is the Alcalde, which is the figurehead mayor. We let both know what our plans were and learned about their concerns. I think being up front with your neighbors and letting them know what is going on is extremely helpful.

Based on your experience partnering with SHI and having these volunteer opportunities for your guests, what would you say is the primary reason people choose to incorporate volunteer work into their travel experience?

It is ultimately that they are just aware of where they are in the world and the advantages that they have. They want to give something back in some way. It's also interesting. Coming in as a stranger and really helping someone out is an incredibly personal experience. Whether you are working with someone for a day or a week, there's a real cultural exchange that occurs. People get a charge out of making a connection with somebody who is from a place very different from where they live.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Even guests who are not here to volunteer and have no interest in that kind of experience often end up enjoying those connections. We may casually suggest joining us for a chocolate making trip or a tortilla making day. To be able to go into someone's house and sit in a kitchen and laugh with a couple of Mayan women about how bad you are at making tortillas is great. People end up cherishing those experiences.

Do you feel like people come away from one of your trips with SHI with an understanding of how slash and burn agriculture has affected the ecology down there?

It can be hard to see. It depends on when you come. If you're coming down right at the end of the dry season, before all the rain comes, yes... it seems like a war zone. If you take a plane from Belize City to Punta Gorda, you see smoke everywhere.

Do you see more partnerships like yours and SHIs being formed within the ecotourism or culture tourism industry?

I have suggested SHI as a partner to other people, so from my limited experience, yes. But I'm a little isolated here.

There is a section on Cotton Tree Lodge's web site dedicated to testimonials. One of your guests said, "Cotton Tree's ecotourism puts the emphasis on "eco," not on "tourism." How do you accomplish this, and how to you keep the lodge itself a sustainable operation?

We grow whatever we can. We have chickens here for laying eggs. Whenever we need to buy something, we buy as locally as possible. We try not to use any imported foods. We used local materials to construct the lodge. We are on a river that floods. We use composting toilets where the waste. Instead of a septic tank and a leech field, we have concrete pits that are filled with gravel and soil and banana trees. All the effluent goes to feed the banana trees, which are very good at evaporating a lot of liquid. Not that there would be anything wrong with it, but we don't eat the bananas.

We rely on solar, but that doesn't produce all the electricity we need, we supplement it with a generator. With the solar panels and generator, we store energy in a bank of batteries. We run off that bank of batteries through inverters.

We also decided that what we needed to cut down in terms of lumber to build our buildings we would try to give back. We have replanted a couple of acres of teak and mahogany. We have also planted some cacao.

You have worked in corporate America and been involved in branding. How would you describe the brand personality of Cotton Tree Lodge?

We just treat people like family. It's very comfortable and a little rustic. I think what people come away with is "I went somewhere where I really got to make a connection with the people around me." When we have meals, it's one long table. You really feel like you're part of a family or a community. It can be isolating when you go away somewhere. A lot of places try to be very exclusive. We try to be inclusive.



Photo courtesy of Cotton Tree Lodge

Tightwad Travel

Putting together this issue of *Leaf Litter* was both thrilling and agonizing. The opportunities described by our eco-voluntourism experts - restoring meadow habitat in Patagonia; helping a Mayan family establish a sustainable farm in the rainforest of Belize; clearing invasive plants from walls built by the Incas in Machu Picchu - practically had me drooling with desire. Sometimes, while my interviewees were still talking, I was imagining myself - cool explorer hat and all - cruising aboard a boat on the Mojo River approaching the gorgeous, eco-friendly Cotton Tree Lodge in Belize. I could see myself planting seedlings with village children. I could practically smell the tortillas.

Sadly, however, four things stood in the way of my embarking on one of these fabulous, volunteer vacations: lack of vacation time, lack of money and two young kids who needed their mom around. It's as though the authors of [Volunteer Travel Insights 2009](#), a volunteer travel study conducted by GeckoGo in conjunction with Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications, had me in mind when they summarized, "Price continues to be a substantial barrier to travelers volunteering..."

While taking some comfort in knowing I wasn't alone, I began to wonder: is eco-voluntourism an experience limited exclusively to people who are wealthy, retired and childless?

In an attempt to answer this question, I decided to arrange my own ecovoluntourism experience - local and low budget.

Following the advice of [Sarah Kennedy of Sustainable Harvest International](#), whom I interviewed for this issue, I began by identifying a reputable non-profit organization whose work I admire: [The Nature Conservancy \(TNC\)](#). I learned that TNC offers so many volunteer opportunities, they actually have a searchable database of activities.

A quick and easy search of opportunities in my home state of Maryland, along with neighboring Virginia, Delaware and Pennsylvania, produced a long list of volunteer activities in interesting places. For example, I could: survey horseshoe crabs on Delaware beaches ; help post interpretive signs at rare rocky glade prairie reserve in Pennsylvania; restore underwater seagrass in the coastal bays of Virginia; or help restore Maryland's largest serpentine barren.

After mulling, calendar checking, hotel searching and calculating costs in my head, I settled on the seagrass restoration project. Though I had spent countless summer vacations on the beaches of Maryland and Delaware, it never occurred to me to check out the "va" portion of that slab of land

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known as the "Delmarva" Peninsula. Intrigued by the notion of visiting an unexplored region of an otherwise familiar area, I decided to go for it. A lover of superlatives, I must admit I found the opportunity to participate in the "[largest seagrass restoration in the world](#)" irresistible.



Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC

To better understand the project (and, truthfully, to get out of the office for an afternoon) I chose to participate in a pre-expedition training and orientation, held at the Anheuser-Busch Coastal Research Center (ABCRC), a biological field station located in Oyster, VA that is operated by the University of Virginia. The first thing I learned was that the project is actually a partnership between TNC, the [Virginia Institute of Marine Science \(VIMS\)](#) and partners in the [Virginia Seaside Heritage Program](#). Funding for the project, which began in 1997, has been provided by Virginia Coastal Zone

Management/Seaside Heritage Program partners including the Campbell Foundation, TNC, Norfolk Southern Foundation, NOAA, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the Norfolk Foundation and the University of Virginia's Long Term Ecological Research Program.

Though I have learned a little about submerged aquatic vegetation through my exposure to the work of my colleagues at Biohabitats, I really didn't know a thing about seagrass. Turns out there are 55 species of seagrass in the world and only one - marine eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) - is in our region. Because marine eelgrass absorbs nutrients, forms the base of a food chain, breaks waves, provides habitat and aids in sediment deposition, it is important to the ecology, stability and protection of coastal bays and barrier islands. But since it grows close to shore and requires between 10-30% of the sunlight that reaches the surface of the water, it is vulnerable, and very susceptible to what we humans do on land.



Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC

Eelgrass used to be abundant along the North Atlantic coast of the U.S. It was obliterated in 1933, however, by a one-two punch from a wasting disease epidemic and a nasty hurricane.

The goal of the TNC/VIMS project is to re-establish eelgrass and its ecosystem services to the Virginia coastal lagoon community. Our job as volunteers was to harvest reproductive shoots of the grass. Donning wet suits and snorkeling gear, we were to find and (gently) pluck the shoots

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from underwater and stuff them into a mesh bag. The seeds from our shoots would be safely stored. Come November, we were told, the seeds would be broadcast in areas where there are currently no grasses. As only 5-15% of the seeds were likely to survive and germinate, the more shoots we could collect, the better. My only apprehension: fitting into my old wet suit. It had been almost a decade since I last squeezed into that self-torture device. Several child bearing years later, I wasn't so sure it would fit.

The training in Oyster, VA provided me with a clear sense of the project's scope and background. Equally important, it allowed me to do a little scouting for my upcoming eco-voluntourism vacation.

Since the eight-hour round trip drive proved to be a bit much for one day, I decided that when I returned for my volunteer excursion, I would pawn the kids off on my ex-husband, travel into the area one day early and spend the night in nearby Cape Charles, VA. The town met my primary criteria (it was close and cute). I also resolved to make my drive down the peninsula part of the adventure. I'd pop into some of the funky named towns I'd spotted on the map. Visit the barrier island of [Chincoteague](#), made famous by the children's book [Misty of Chincoteague](#). The trip was coming together and was even beginning to sound a bit - forgive me - *delmarvalous*!

Preparing for this trip would be easy. The day before the trip, with a change of clothes, my running shoes (I always incorporate a run into my vacations), bathing suit, towel, snorkeling gear, sunscreen, insect repellent, some snacks packed in a small bag, only one task remained: trying on the dreaded wet suit. Let's just say a) it wasn't pretty and b) I decided on-the-spot to donate it to TNC in the hopes that a slimmer seagrass volunteer might be able to use it in the future. Luckily, TNC promised to have a number of wet suits - in a variety of sizes - available for volunteers to borrow.



Pocomoke City, MD

The drive down the peninsula was delightful. While I was drawn to Pocomoke City, MD and Onancock, VA by their strange sounding names, they turned out be lovely, historic little towns. While I didn't have time to put Pocomoke City's tourism office claim that "You are almost guaranteed to spot a bald eagle overhead while boating on our (Pocomoke) river" I enjoyed the stop nonetheless.

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Discovered by John Smith in 1608, Onancock, VA proved to be an interesting spot as well. Although the town's name comes from a Native American term meaning "foggy place," its sheltered harbor and charming town square sparkled in their Memorial Day décor before a stunning, blue sky backdrop. Though I didn't have time to make my planned stop in Coocheyville, VA, I have no doubt that it, too, would have surprised me with its charm.



Onancock's town square



The view crossing the bridge to Chincoteague Island.

I was able to make it to Chincoteague Island. Though I was not expecting to find so many hotels and souvenir shops on what I somehow imagined to be a pristine island, I marveled at its expansive salt marshes nonetheless.

Less than four hours after leaving Baltimore, I arrived at my destination for the night: the [Cape Charles House Bed and Breakfast](#). What a welcome sight. Built in 1912, the Colonial Revival frame house sits on a quiet, tree-lined street that felt more like a movie set. The house's airy, expansive porch practically drew me into the front door, where I was met - and treated like a dear, old friend - by Bruce Evans, who owns the place with his wife, Carol.



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Aqua's lovely view

Bruce invited me to the porch, where I was served (on a silver tray!) a fresh plate of cheese, a glass of wine and some good old fashioned solitude. While I melted into a cushioned wicker chair and enjoyed my wine and the evening breeze, Bruce called in a reservation to Aqua, a nearby restaurant where I could sample some locally harvested seafood and produce. A short walk later, I was sitting beside a window in Aqua, eating what was, perhaps, the most delicious shrimp appetizer I had ever tasted. It was there that I was able to witness a rarely seen bit of nature: a Virginia sunset. After a crisp, fresh, locally-produced salad, the perfect end to my evening came in the form

of harmless flirtation from a waiter who was easily half my age. I liked Cape Charles.

After a morning run through the town's quaint streets and along its public beach, I sat down to a full, gourmet breakfast prepared by Carol, a former writer for a national cooking magazine. In addition to being a great cook, Carol happens to serve on the board of Virginia's Eastern Shore Tourism Commission. What luck! With half a day to spend in the area before embarking on my volunteer excursion, I could use some guidance from Carol. For a little perspective on the local history and ecology, Carol suggested I visit the Cape Charles Museum and the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge.



At the [Cape Charles Museum](#), I learned that up until 1883, the town did not exist. Like much of the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the region consisted of small, scattered towns focused on seafood and agriculture. Around that time, William L. Scott, a coal and railroad magnate, and Alexander J. Cassatt (brother of the famous painter, Mary), an engineer, linked the agricultural centers of the

South with the major cities of the North by extending the Pennsylvania Railroad down the peninsula. This also involved the creation of a water link

over the Chesapeake Bay by which fully loaded railroad cars could be floated across to Norfolk, VA. With the railroad complete and the harbor dredged, Cape Charles came to life and became an economic hub. By 1912, the Cape Charles harbor was handling 2,500,000 tons of freight a year. For many years, Cape Charles continued to be a bustling terminal for passenger and car ferry service across the Bay. With the decline of the railroad industry after World War II and the construction of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel (Yes folks. It's a bridge AND a tunnel), things in Cape Charles slowed down. Today, the town seems to be emerging from a slumber, with people quietly renovating homes, opening businesses, and drawing in tourists. I was glad to be one of them.

The [Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge](#) is a 725-acre wonderland of maritime forest, myrtle and bayberry thickets, grasslands, croplands and fresh and brackish ponds. Located at the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, the refuge straddles one of America's most important avian migratory funnels.

From the moment I stepped out of my car in the visitor's center parking lot, I was blown away by the wildlife. Accompanied by an unending symphony of songbirds, hawks, ospreys and eagles soared above me. Swallows swirled about. Butterflies danced in front of me as I walked along the refuge's empty trails. I half expected a team of happy, little bluebirds to fly alongside me in heart formation.



My visit to the refuge helped me understand the network of landscapes into which my volunteer project fit. Bearing the brunt of the ocean's force, the barrier islands protect coastal saltmarshes and provide sanctuary for thousands of colonial nesting birds and migratory shorebirds. The islands' dunes serve as a resting spot for colonies of brown pelicans. The shrubs on the landward side of the islands are home to wading birds. The barrier islands are so critical to the survival of birds that they are actually protected as an [UNESCO Biosphere Reserve](#).

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The intertidal saltmarsh, sheltered between the barrier islands and the Delmarva mainland, contains a rich food chain of fish, shellfish and invertebrates. Terrapins and seahorses live among the eelgrass I'll be helping to restore. The marshes serve as important wintering grounds for many species of ducks and geese and provide nesting habitat for several species

of gulls, terns and rails. The inland sheltered shrub thickets and forested uplands provide even more habitat and ecosystem services.

I could have easily spent several more hours at the refuge but the time had come to meet my volunteer group at the boat ramp back in Oyster. Upon arriving at the ramp, I met my fellow volunteers and our leader, Bo Lusk of TNC. Bo welcomed us with a brief orientation and description of the work we'd be doing. He pointed out a facility across the harbor, where the seeds would be separated from the shoots we gather and safely stored for germination. The sky was overcast, and, in what was perhaps the understatement of a lifetime, Bo warned us that our boat ride out to the project site might be a little bumpy.



We boarded a small boat for what turned out to be a wet, spine-jarring, but absolutely thrilling ride out to the barrier islands. Bouncing along the choppy bay water, with sea spray dousing me in regular, four-second intervals, it was hard to imagine that the web of life I read and learned about really was just under the surface of the water. (I pitied the seahorse that was anywhere near the pounding bow of our boat.)



Within 20 minutes, we were docked at barge several hundred yards off the coast of [Wreck Island](#), which is located near the southern terminus of the chain of barrier islands along Virginia's Eastern Shore. It felt like the middle of nowhere. I ignored a rising feeling of agoraphobia, and embraced the tranquility of the site. We were soon joined by a boat of VIMS scientists, who would be

joining us in harvesting reproductive eelgrass shoots.

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Fortunately, my TNC-issue size small (ahem, men's, that is) wet suit fit just fine. As instructed, though somewhat reluctantly, I hung the mesh bag noose-style around my neck. I put on my mask and snorkel and slid off the barge and into the 70 degree water. I was surprised to discover that although it was high tide, the water was only up to my waste.



Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC



*A reproductive shoot of eelgrass.
Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC*

Then, another surprise. Snorkeling to search for reproductive shoots of eelgrass in a coastal bay is not quite the same experience as, say, snorkeling along a reef in clear Caribbean waters. The turbidity of the water, along with the strong current and cloudy sky, made for very poor visibility. I would not be seeing any terrapins or seahorses on that day.

It was not difficult, however, to spot the reproductive shoots of eelgrass. Unlike regular shoots, these were slightly puffy, with little rice kernel sized seeds stacked along the blade. Nonetheless, I quickly became used to the rhythm of the work....plunge, look, grab, pull, stuff, resurface. As the tide receded, the water level dropped to almost knee level, making the cycles of repetition shorter and shorter. This continued for a couple of hours, when I finally filled my first bag.



Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC



Photo courtesy of Daniel White/TNC

Working underwater was very interesting. With the sounds and sights of the above-water world shut out, everything becomes very peaceful and solitary. Working in a wet suit, and concentrating on your work, you also don't know how cold you are until you suddenly realize that you can no longer feel your fingers and your guide tells you your lips have turned purple. Good time for a break.

While waiting for the sensation to come back into my fingers, I chatted with Scott Marion, of the VIMS Department of Biological Sciences SAV

Monitoring and Research Program. Scott explained to me what would

ultimately happen to the seeds we harvested after they are placed in their storage tanks.

As the seeds mature, they will fall out of the reproductive shoots and fall to the bottom of the tanks. The vegetated material is then winnowed out so only seeds are left at the bottom of the tanks. The VIMS and TNC folks then use a series of flumes to separate the seeds. The densest seeds are pulled out and stored in re-circulated sea water. In the fall, they are either broadcast by the handful - meaning they are throw over the side of the boat - or they are planted with one of VIMS' new planting technologies. For example, they have a seed planter that can inject the seeds right into the bottom, which results in slightly better germination rates.

With the beds as productive as they are this year, Scott estimates that over the harvesting period (May and June) over ten million seeds may be harvested.

Scott made me feel great about volunteering. "Volunteers are critical to this project," he said. "This is about numbers of hands stuffing seeds into bags. Some of us have been doing this for years and are very fast at it, but you can't make up for the number of people that are out here helping to stuff seeds."



Bolstered by Scott's comments, I went back into the water, eager to grab more reproductive shoots. While I didn't quite fill another bag, I did experience a heroic moment when I rescued a wayward, stuffed bag of shoots that had come untied from barge. At the end of the day, I was amazed at how many stuffed bags our volunteer group and the team from VIMS collected.

If the ride back to Oyster was as rough as the ride out the project site, I didn't notice. I felt too happy, inspired, proud and glad to be out of the wet suit to notice. I thought, instead, about the question I set out to answer by taking this trip. Is eco-voluntourism accessible by someone like me?

I did a quick assessment:

Because my travel day fell on a weekend, I only missed one day of work. The kids were safely stowed and happy. I spent \$40 on gas and tolls traveling between Baltimore and Oyster (a carbon footprint I hope will be at

least offset by my effort on the restoration). Admittance to the museum and refuge were free. My fabulous dinner at Aqua was only \$15 (with tip!). The priciest part of my trip was my room at the Cape Charles House (\$120). While this cost was comparable to the cost of a room at a roadside chain hotel, the quality of accommodations, hospitality, attention, and great food offered by Bruce and Carol is worth twice that much. To eliminate that expense the next time (and yes, I will likely be a repeat volunteer) I may camp in nearby Kiptopeke State Park for under \$30.



The author enjoys a moment with The Nature Conservancy's Bo Rusk and a properly fitting wet suit.

As the boat docked back in Oyster, I realized that my cheeks were actually sore from smiling. That's when I arrived at my answer: yes.

For more information about the seagrass restoration project or any of TNC's volunteer opportunities, visit [The Nature Conservancy web site](#).

Restoring Seagrass with The Nature Conservancy

[Click the image to view this video.](#)



Non-Profit Spotlight

Earthwatch Institute
www.earthwatch.org

It would be foolish to explore the topic of eco-voluntourism without mentioning [Earthwatch Institute](http://www.earthwatch.org). This non-profit organization was among the first to pioneer the concept of "citizen science." It is now regarded as "the world's largest environmental volunteer nonprofit organization."



Earthwatch volunteers study how climate change is affecting the landscape at the edge of the Arctic. Photo by Peter Kershaw.

With a mission to "engage people worldwide in scientific field research and education in order to promote the understanding and action necessary for a sustainable environment," Earthwatch offers unique opportunities to work alongside leading field researchers around the world.

Earthwatch's history dates back to 1971, when geologist Dr. Paul Mohr of the Smithsonian Institution took 20 wide-eyed volunteers to the remote Amaro Mountains of Ethiopia. Now, nearly 40 years and 1360 projects later, more than 93,000 volunteers have contributed \$72 million to scientific fieldwork.



An Earthwatch volunteer helps to monitor a coral reef as part of the "Bahamian Reef Survey" project on San Salvador Island. Photo by John Rollino.

This year alone, Earthwatch is sponsoring more than 120 research projects in 38 countries and 20 US states, making estimated volunteer field grants of \$5.7 million. As you read this, Earthwatch volunteers are busy assessing the impact of climate change in Borneo's tropical rainforests to inform future forest restoration programs; sampling and measuring sediments on Icelandic glaciers; studying Bahamian reefs; and surveying elephants on the Kenyan savannah.

Earthwatch team members share the costs of research expeditions and cover food and lodging expenses with a pro-rated, US tax-deductible contribution. According to Earthwatch's public relations director, Kristen Kusek, expedition contribution costs range from \$650 to \$5,050, averaging \$2,700 for 5-16 day team duration. This excludes airfare.

The return on investment of such a trip, however, seems immeasurable. "Our volunteers have the satisfaction of knowing that they contributed DIRECTLY to conservation research that matters-by getting their own hands dirty and doing the research themselves alongside top-notch scientists in the field," said Kristen.

Many Earthwatch volunteers also have the opportunity to become immersed in local cultures and provide measurable impacts to a community. "This is the case in our sustainable coffee farming project in Costa Rica, for example," said Kristen. "Volunteers work on research that directly assists local coffee farmers and even share meals with them during the experience. The volunteer returns home with a whole new appreciation for that morning cup of coffee because they just worked side by side with farmers who supply that coffee in the first place."



Earthwatch volunteers measure the size of the coffee plants on the Sustainable Coffee Farming project in Costa Rica. Photo by Anna Janovicz.

Earthwatch expeditions have led to some tangible and rather impressive results. Mangrove stands have been restored in Sri Lanka and Kenya. A dolphin project resulted in the redirection of shipping lanes in the Mediterranean. A decrease in the use of synthetic fertilizer by coffee farmers in Costa Rica has helped improve soil quality. These are just some of Earthwatch's many success stories.

Perhaps one of the most exciting tales is best told in the words of one Earthwatch's favorite volunteers, Warren Stortroen of St. Paul, MN. Warren, who has participated in more than 55 Earthwatch expeditions to date, describes his extraordinary archaeology 'find' on Earthwatch's "Mexican Megafauna" expedition in 2006:

"It was the best find of my whole career," said Warren.

"We were prospecting in a maze of arroyos and I had my own GPS, so I was able to make a home base, leave the group and wander freely. At a promising branch of the arroyo I first found a piece of a mastodon tusk, and a little further on spotted a ledge with some bone that appeared to be a joint socket or vertebrae and possibly skuttes (armor plating). I selected some of them and brought them out to the van where we met for lunch. When I showed them to Oscar [the scientist] he was elated! The tusk was only of mild interest, but the other bones were from a giant armored glyptodont! I had marked the spot on my GPS, so we all went back there after lunch. When I pointed out where I found the bones, Oscar looked around and said,

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"Warren, I see the animal!" Above the ledge he could see the edge of the nearly intact carapace. This extinct mammal was a distant relative of the armadillo, but nearly as big as a Volkswagen!"

[Note: It was a [giant glyptodon](#), which is related to the armadillo, and this was apparently one of the most complete finds of this animal in archaeological history.]

If an Earthwatch expedition appeals to you, but not necessarily your wallet, you may want to look into a Change Ambassador grant, part of [Travelocity's "Travel for Good" program](#). According to Kristen, Earthwatch volunteers may receive up to \$5000 toward their costs!

To support the work of Earthwatch Institute or learn more about their Earthwatch Expeditions or support their efforts, visit [their web site](#)!

Resources

In addition to the many links that appear throughout this issue we have gathered the following recommended resources on green roofs and walls.

[Biosphere Expeditions](#) is an international non-profit wildlife volunteer organisation, founded in 1999, that runs conservation expeditions aka conservation holidays for environmental volunteers all across the globe.

[Blue Ventures](#), a marine conservation organisation dedicated to conservation, education and sustainable development in tropical coastal communities, offers volunteer opportunities.

[Cheaptickets](#) and the United Way offer links, resources and an online communities for VolunTourists to share their experiences with others.

[Conservation Volunteers International Program \(Conservation VIP\)](#)

[Cross Cultural Solutions](#)

[Earthwatch](#) engages people worldwide in scientific field research and education in order to promote the understanding and action necessary for a sustainable environment.

[Ecovolunteer.org](#) offers programs that enable you to experience places that are not accessible to tourists while you help local organizations with conservation projects.

[Frontier](#)

[Geovisions Conservation Corps](#)

[Global Citizens Network](#)

[Gloval Vision International](#) offers volunteers the chance for a hands-on experience personally contributing to important conservation initiatives and community projects around the world.

[i-to-i](#), which advertises "Life changing travel," offers conservation and wildlife volunteer opportunities throughout the world.

[International Ecotourism Society](#)

[The Nature Conservancy's Volunteer Opportunities](#)

[Serve America Act](#)

[State of the Volunteer Travel Industry \(Survey Results\)](#)

[Sustainable Harvest International's Smaller World Tours](#)

[Sustainable Travel International](#) provides education and outreach services that help travelers, travel providers and related organizations support environmental conservation and protect cultural heritage while promoting cross-cultural understanding and economic development.

[Travel Insights 2009](#), a volunteer travel study conducted by GeckoGo in conjunction with Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications.

[Travelocity's Travel for Good Program](#), helps people interested in volunteer travel by offering Change Ambassadors grants and links to organizations and services involved in voluntourism.

[Volunteer.gov](#) America's Natural and Cultural Resources Volunteer portal

[VolunTourism.org](#) bills itself as "THE resource on all things volunTourism." The organization facilitates the unification and alignment between the world's two largest economic and social engines - respectively, the tourism industry (Destinations & Operators) and the Nonprofit sector.

[WOOF: Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms](#)

Biohabitats' Projects, Places and People

Biohabitats' Projects

From Dry Pond To Living System

Built in the early 1960s as a traditional "dry pond," the Langerdale detention basin in South Euclid, OH drained 7.6 square miles in the Nine Mile Creek watershed. The basin, which relegated the stream to a concrete channel, had overflowed twice, causing flooding to adjacent homes. Recognizing the value of Nine Mile Creek as a tributary to Lake Erie and a critical component of the community's green infrastructure, the City of South Euclid launched an effort to restore this urban stream, beginning with a retrofit of the detention basin.



Working closely with the City, the Biohabitats team developed a design intended to achieve the goals of maximizing storage volume, augmenting aquatic habitat and minimizing long term maintenance. With construction complete, we look forward to watching life return to what is now a system comprised of an aquatic bed and open water wetland, scrub-shrub emergent

wetland, forested wetland, riparian deciduous forest and native mesic meadow. For more information on this project (including lots of photos), check out the [Cuyahoga River Community Planning Organization's web site](#).

In Baltimore, Sharing Is Caring ...And Smart

With the intent to improve water quality within the shared watersheds of Baltimore County, MD and the City of Baltimore, leaders from both jurisdictions signed the [Baltimore Watershed Agreement](#) in 2002. The agreement was renewed in 2006, with even greater emphasis placed on cooperation. A Committee of Principals (COP), comprised of representatives from several key departments and NGOs from each jurisdiction, was charged with developing specific actions toward water quality improvement through the issues of development and redevelopment, community greening, stormwater, public health and trash.



Biohabitats was called upon to join a County consultant in assisting the COP in refining and enhancing the recommended actions. The result is a draft "Phase I Action Plan" that sets the stage for the implementation of initial, short-term actions in five topic areas and organizes actions into the categories of Implementation, Policy & Regulation, Planning & Collaboration, Education and Outreach/Awareness. The development of this plan represents a commitment to an unprecedented level of collaboration between the City and County. We applaud the City of Baltimore and Baltimore County for setting an example we hope others will follow.

High Life

The New Jersey Highlands is an 859,358-acre region of northern New Jersey, Rich in natural resources such as wetlands, grasslands, streams and forests, the New Jersey Highlands provide vital open space, farmland, scenic beauty and habitat for several threatened, endangered and declining species. The region also serves as a drinking water source for more than half of New Jersey's population. Despite its value, the Highlands region is under imminent threat from suburban sprawl. Biohabitats was chosen by the [New Jersey Highlands Council](#) to assist with the development of a Critical Habitat Conservation and Management program for the New Jersey Highlands Region. We are thrilled to play a role in developing mitigation strategies and concepts to help protect the region's ecological integrity and 'sense of place.'

Peerless Stream Restoration Receives Award

The City of Rockville Department of Public Works received a 2009 Preservation Award from [Peerless Rockville Historic Preservation](#) for the rehabilitation and restoration of the Twinbrook/Rockcrest Stream, a tributary to the Potomac River within the City of Rockville, MD.





The award, which recognizes outstanding achievement in preservation, new construction, heritage education, and "green" design, signifies a firm nod of approval for a design that restores bank stability and habitat, improves invasive species management, and enhances park amenities. The Biohabitats team is proud to have been a part of this award-winning project, and we look forward to monitoring its success over the next several years.

Critical Work On Long Beach Island Receives Prestigious Award

In 2007, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed a beachfill in the boroughs of Surf City and Ship Bottom on Long Beach Island, NJ. Shortly afterwards, World War I-era munitions were discovered in the beachfill. While the Corps swiftly undertook action to remove the munitions, a full scale dune/beach demolition, sand sifting, and dune/beach reconstruction operation was undertaken in January, 2009. Just prior to the commencement of the munitions sifting operation, the Corps contracted with our sister construction company, [Ecological Restoration and Management \(ER&M\)](#), to devise a cost-effective plan to harvest and store the existing beachgrass (originally installed in 2007). All plant materials were held in cold storage for later reinstallation as the dunes were rebuilt after the sifting operation. The work was completed this spring, with nearly 100% of the transplanted materials currently surviving and reestablishing on the new dunes. Kudos to ER&M and all members of the Project Delivery Team for The Surf City & Ship Bottom Munitions and Explosives of Concern Non-Time Critical Removal Action. In recognition of their collective partnering efforts to overcome numerous challenges and obstacles to successfully complete a critical high profile mission, the team was selected as a recipient of the Philadelphia District's External Partnering Award for 2009.



While We're On The Subject of Awards...



In the last issue of Leaf Litter, we told you about our work on a master plan for [Jefferson Memorial Forest](#), a 6,000 acre forest established as a tribute to Jefferson County, Kentucky veterans. As a key member of Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Parks' selected master planning team, led by [Jones & Jones](#), we are pleased to announce that the master plan has been awarded a Merit Award

in the Planning and Analysis category from the Kentucky Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. We're proud to have been a part of a team whose work resulted in a plan that respects and enhances the ecological significance of this immense and important park.

Places

Biohabitats team members Terry Doss, Allegra Bukojemsky and Joe Berg will join ecological restoration professionals from around the country at the [3rd National Conference on Ecosystem Restoration](#). The event, which takes place July 20-24 in Los Angeles, CA, will share lessons-learned from the conduct of large-scale ecosystem restoration programs both in the U.S. and internationally. Don't miss Terry's presentation on Urban Ecosystem Restoration, Allegra's poster "Smart Growth as a Catalyst for Tidal Wetlands Restoration in San Francisco Bay" and Joe's poster, "Regenerative Stormwater Conveyance as a technique for Zero Discharge Stormwater."

[StormCON](#), the world's largest stormwater pollution prevention conference, will take place August 16-20 in Anaheim, CA. Biohabitats Water Resources Engineer Jennifer Zielinski and Landscape Architect Allegra Bukojemsky will team up to present "Regenerative Stormwater Conveyance: A New Tool to Effectively Mitigate Failed Stormwater Outfalls." If you're arriving early to the conference, be sure to check out "The Art and Science of Stormwater Retrofitting to Restore Ecosystems and Create Community Spaces," http://www.stormcon.com/conference_pre.shtm#3 a pre-conference workshop presented by Biohabitats and the Center for Watershed Protection.

Biohabitats president Keith Bowers will head to the land down under to attend the [19th Conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration International](#). Held in Perth, Australia from August 23-27, this gathering will focus on "Making Change in a Changing World." Keith will co-present a session on post-secondary restoration education.

People

The next time you call or visit our headquarters and Chesapeake/Delaware Bays Bioregional office, say hello to Ada Perry, our new administrative assistant. Having spent the last year and a half with Armada Hoffer, a construction and development firm in Virginia Beach, VA, Ada was drawn to Biohabitats by our mission. A Brooklyn, NY native, she brings a warm smile and cheery disposition to work every day - which is surprising considering she's the mother of a 2-year old. Ada holds a B.A. in Criminal Justice and is currently pursuing an M.S. in Psychology. On the rare occasion that her child is sleeping and she is not working or studying, Ada can be found with her nose in a book. Welcome, Ada!



Congratulations to Biohabitats' Ecological Designer Nicole Stern and Water Resources Engineers Ted Brown and Mike Lighthiser, the latest members of our team to earn their LEED certification. Joining them on our cadre of LEED certified professionals is Landscape Architect Allegra Bukojemsky, Ecological Engineer Chris Streb, Water Resources Engineer Nick Lindow and Kevin Heatley of Biohabitats ISM.

Biohabitats President Keith Bowers recently accepted an esteemed volunteer position with the [International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#). As the Theme Lead for Ecological Restoration, Keith will help the [IUCN's Commission on Ecosystem Management](#) to provide expert guidance on integrated approaches to the management of natural and modified ecosystems to promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable development throughout the world.

About Leaf Litter

Leaf Litter is a publication of Biohabitats, Inc. Coinciding with the earth's biorhythms, it is published at the Fall Equinox, Winter Solstice, Spring Equinox and Summer Solstice to probe issues relating to conservation planning, ecological restoration, and regenerative design. Biohabitats has attempted to ensure the accuracy and veracity of the information provided in *Leaf Litter*, however, information contained in *Leaf Litter* should not be construed as a recommendation or endorsement by Biohabitats. Please click [here](#) to contact Leaf Litter editors with questions, comments or content ideas.

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Biohabitats is an ecological design and consulting firm specializing in conservation planning, ecological restoration, and regenerative design. To learn more about our ecological services, mission and vision, visit us at www.biohabitats.com.

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