



Ecotourism for economic development

El Pilche is located in a buffer zone of the Yasuni National Park in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The population is food insecure, practicing ancestral family farming on limited land, and are without the services of electricity and health care.

The *Casa Grande* (Big House) of the Strathcona Lodge is a bustle of activity as dental brigade volunteers prepare for a clinic day in the 84-family remote Kichwa community of El Pilche. The group of 18 Canadian volunteers are the first guests of the Strathcona Lodge, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon and accessed only by boat. Looking out over the compound from beneath the thatched roof of the main building, a 2.5-hour trip down the Napo River from the town of Coca, it is hard to fathom that the lodge, the cabanas, the biodigesters, the grounds, all surrounded by a tangle of virgin primary forest and almost seamlessly integrated into the jungle landscape, were all just lines on a plan just one year ago.

Three years ago, we felt the intense energy in Edmonton's Strathcona High School gymnasium during the launch of the fundraising initiative whose goal was to promote a sustainable venture and increase economic opportunities for local indigenous peoples in the Amazon Rainforest of Ecuador. Today, after

much planning and community involvement, we feel the sense of pride of the Kichwa people as the Strathcona Lodge welcomes its first guests.

And while Strathcona High School provided the funds, the El Pilche community provided the workforce. The floors, built from capirona trees growing on the shores of the Napo River, absolutely shine. The railings, artfully pieced together with tacarache root from jungle lagoons, radiate the pride that went into creating them. Each family harvested and donated the wood used in the construction, and community members worked together to carry timbers through the dense forest, to weave the straw roofs, and to haul stones from the river for the cabana floors.

Strathcona lodge is quite obviously a labour of love, but for the small community of El Pilche, it is before anything, a means to move forward.



The motto of Edmonton's Strathcona High School is, "As One Who Serves." Each year, the student body unites to choose and support a cause that will create positive, sustainable change.

In 2015, student fundraising efforts contributed over \$150,000 to support an ecotourism project in Ecuador. Today, the aptly named Strathcona Lodge is open for business.





Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection

(UN General Assembly Resolution 69/233)

Article 2. Recognizes that sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, represents an important driver of sustainable economic growth and decent job creation, that it can have a positive impact on income generation and education, and thus on the fight against poverty and hunger..."

ec-o-tour-ism noun

Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, socially and economically sustains the well-being of local people, and creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education of all involved (including staff, travelers, and community residents).

(United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO)

Conserving Environments, Sustaining Communities

Ecotourism should empower local people through shared participation, provide income opportunities to stimulate local economy, and have minimal impact on natural resources to conserve local diversity.

Ecotourism allows communities to build economies while protecting natural environments. Local jobs provide income, and controlling the way outsiders experience pristine environments protects them from exploitation. Increasing understanding of and sensitivity to remote locations and cultures encourages sustainable thinking and raises awareness as travelers learn sustainable ways to support communities outside their own country.

The potential for ecotourism to conserve environments, educate travelers, and sustain vulnerable communities means a positive impact in the fight against both ignorance and poverty.



The Casa Verde makes the remote Bosawas rainforest and the communities on the banks of the Coco River accessible to adventurous visitors.

Casa Verde

Bosawas, Nicaragua

The *Casa Verde* – the Green House – established in San Andres on the banks of the Coco River in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in northeast Nicaragua has provided a humble home away from home for students, volunteers, field staff, and visitors since its construction in 2008 with support from Change for Children. The Casa Verde and its kind hosts have warmly



received over 25 organized brigades from Change for Children alone — hanging hammocks, preparing meals, and even providing musical entertainment for soil scientists, teachers, youth, dental professionals, and geologists alike.

The location of the Casa Verde is not only remote, but is also extremely rich in biodiversity. Although the Miskito and Mayagna peoples have lived in this territory for hundreds of years, many of the Bosawas' 20,000 square kilometres – the largest protected rainforest north of the Amazon and designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 1997 – remain largely unexplored.

Change for Children is exploring opportunities to work with the Miskito people to promote responsible travel to this unspoiled natural area where species of birds, plants, and insects abound and where sharing conservation education and knowledge justly nurtures local pride.

Increased ecotourism in the area has the potential to sustain the well-being of local people environmentally, socially, and economically in a location where isolation and lack of outside resources have historically contributed to lack of opportunity.



The Strathcona Lodge under construction by El Pilche community members.

Strathcona Lodge

El Pilche, Ecuador

The Strathcona Lodge is an opportunity for the El Pilche community to generate jobs for its people and income into this remote area. In its early stages, the community has prioritized the use of revenue for improving access to healthcare for pregnant women and the elderly and enabling a paid teacher position in the local school.



The El Pilche community, engaged in all aspects of the initiative, stands to benefit economically, cooperatively, and collectively. Collective thinking has already generated community plans for a future organic garden and medicinal plant nursery.

The Lodge is well-positioned to provide accommodation for volunteers working in indigenous communities on activities such as medical brigades, scientific studies, and permaculture work. As stewards of the 9,200 hectares of primary forest in which they live, the Kichwa people, having first built the Lodge, are now eager to welcome guests and build community.



Albergue Sapecho

Alto Beni, Bolivia

The *Albergue Sapecho* (Sapecho Hostel), constructed with support from Change for Children in various phases from 2009 to 2014 is located in the small community of Sapecho in north central Bolivia. Originally constructed as a field



house for hosting training workshops for women entrepreneurs, the Sapecho Hostel is well-positioned to take on a greater role in stimulating the economy for the Moseten Indigenous peoples in the Alto Beni municipality of Bolivia where traditional lands are being over-exploited by industry and damaging the delicate rainforest ecosystem.

Project partners are now leveraging the amenity and taking advantage of its remote location to promote locally-operated multi-day eco-tours. Visitors are introduced to the local ecological production of organic cocoa, experience the beauty of the Kaka River, and also learn of the intensive water pollution and deforestation caused by irresponsible gold mining companies. While balancing environmental and social awareness with rainforest adventure, ecotourism in Sapecho is allowing communities to build economies without exploiting, altering, or destroying the environment.

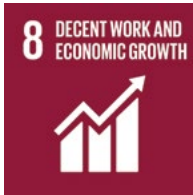
Benefits of Ecotourism

- *Promotes social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction*
- *Protects pristine natural environments*
- *Allows communities to build economies without exploiting, altering, or destroying the environment or wildlife habitats*
- *Empowers communities and nurtures pride within*
- *Promotes cultural diversity*
- *Builds community between visitors and hosts*
- *Provides opportunities for cross-cultural encounters*
- *Increases accessibility of unspoiled destinations in a responsible way*



A tourism sector that adopts sustainable consumption and production practices can play a significant role in accelerating the global shift towards sustainability.

Sustainable Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals



Sustainable tourism fosters economic growth. Engaging local populations and increasing local opportunities for communities to prosper is a powerful tool for community development.



The operation of ecofriendly, innovative, sustainable lodges promotes entrepreneurship and empowers vulnerable individuals and communities, thereby reducing inequalities and promoting local culture and products.



Encouraging sustainable consumption and production practices plays a major role in conserving, preserving, and respecting the very sites that attract tourism and in promoting the goal of a shift towards sustainability and reduced consumption.



Graciella lives next door to the Casa Verde. In her home, she and her family prepare the meals that are enjoyed by visitors to the remote Bosawas Biosphere Reserve, but she also welcomes those same visitors to step inside, to sit and visit, and even to try their hand at the tradition of tortilla-making. Her position allows her to proudly share her culture; her income allows her to provide for her family, to plant a garden, to send her kids to school.

Change for Children is exploring opportunities to further engage local populations in responsible tourism in Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

Special thanks to Strathcona High School for their generous support of eco-tourism in Ecuador.



Change for Children partners with grassroots organizations in Latin America & Africa to support community-based solutions to poverty and social injustice while providing unique global education programs here in Canada.

Change for Children is a non-sectarian, non-partisan, non-profit organization operating from Edmonton, AB since 1976.

Charitable # 11884 9496 RR0001

10808-124 Street, 2nd Floor
Edmonton, AB, T5M 0H3
Ph: 780.448.1505
Fax: 780.448.1507
cfca@changeforchildren.org

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www.changeforchildren.org

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