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Promoting Tourism, Protecting Human and Environmental Health

Two communities develop a solution to obtaining clean water, washing clothes and removing impacts to lagoons important for their environmental tourism.

Two communities in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala were faced with a problem. They had invested a lot of time and energy into developing and maintaining a community tourism project which had as its main attraction the beautiful lagoons of Sepalau (Lagunas de Sepalau). The communities have recognized the need to protect and conserve these lagoons, but at the same time, they must utilize the lagoons as a source of water for drinking, bathing and washing clothes. The use of chlorine and soaps was degrading the water quality, affecting the health of the inhabitants, and contaminating the lagoon. Tourists increasingly would not swim in the lagoons due to the growing, and obvious, contamination.

With the help of Fundacion Solar, USAID, the U.S. Peace Corps and Sandia National Laboratories, a solution was developed for these communities. A system of communal washing stations was developed, fed by rain water and water from the lagoons. The water was brought to the washing stations by pumps. To clean the water after use, a series of natural treatment galleries and ponds were built. First, the water passes through a

septic-like process combined with filtration through sand. Next, the water passes into two ponds set out in series. In both ponds, native plants of the region are utilized to clean the chemicals from the water. These plants are very effective in removing chemicals associated with soaps. The water is then returned to the lagoons, clean and clear. The plants utilized to clean the water are harvested on a regular basis and utilized to produce baskets and to fertilize crops.

Now the 250 community members have an attractive and environmentally protected tourist destination at the beginning of the route to world of the Maya, and have raised the health and economic status of the communities at the same time.

'We want to conserve our natural heritage, the lagoons are sacred to us, but here at Sepalau and Sepoc, we don't have another option. We must wash in the lagoons. We don't have lights nor potable water. Thanks to the support of USAID, Peace Corps, Sandia and Fundación Solar, we have today the capacity to really manage the conservation of our lagoons'. Marcos Xe, president of the Community of Sepalau and evangelic pastor.

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