

1. Nature Guide Training Program Description



**SELECTIONS FROM:
INTERPRETING FOR CONSERVATION
A MANUAL FOR TRAINING
LOCAL NATURE GUIDES**

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RARE NATURE GUIDE TRAINING PROGRAM

In 1994, RARE Center implemented the first Nature Guide Training Program (NGTP) in Costa Rica as a way to help rural adults participate in, and benefit from, ecotourism. NGTP provides students with little formal education the basic skills needed to work as nature guides, community-based tour operators, and other related jobs - offering them sustainable local economic alternatives.



The conservation and community development benefits that result directly from the NGTP include:

- The value of conservation within nearby rural communities is increased by the creation of local jobs dependent upon the existence of protected areas. Guiding also represents tourism-related employment beyond the lower-level service-oriented jobs that have historically been offered to local populations.
- NGTP guides are encouraged to become conservation activists, and often return to their communities to begin environmental education programs, develop interpretive nature trails, and initiate their own local guide training programs.
- NGTP graduates are encouraged to not only guide visitors, but to educate them as well by incorporating conservation messages into their tours - messages that are heard by thousands of international visitors each year.
- The existence of local guides increases protected areas' ability to monitor threats to park resources and enforce site visitation regulations.

The Nature Guide Training Program was developed through a unique collaboration with Latin American protected area managers, local tour operators, and WorldTeach – a Harvard University-based volunteer organization. Since the first course, RARE Center has collaborated with dozens of tour operators, NGOs, and government agencies to provide courses in Mexico's Southern Baja Peninsula and Yucatan Peninsula, the Mexican state of Chiapas, Guatemala, and the North Coast of Honduras. RARE Center recently initiated the first NGTP in South Africa, and future courses are anticipated in Indonesia and throughout Central America.

Methodology

The NGTP curriculum is based on a state-of-the-art training methodology in which students live and study with their teachers in an isolated, English-only environment. During the three-month course and one-month follow-up period, students receive more than 1,000 hours of practical experience, equal to more than a year at a U.S. university. The curriculum covers conversational English, local natural and cultural history, interpretation, and guiding skills - as well as basic tour planning and marketing. Curriculum and teaching materials are adapted to the specific needs of each country or region.

The program utilizes proven experiential learning techniques so that students acquire skills by actually using and developing them, rather than by studying about them. Throughout the course, students create and lead tours, give oral presentations, design signs, collaborate to solve problems, and carry out role-plays.

The NGTP is an intensive twelve-month program organized in three phases:

- **Pre-course:** Pre-course activities last approximately four months and includes selecting local partner organizations, selecting 16 students, training a supervisor for each local organization who will provide follow-up to the guides, and preparing the team of course staff and volunteer teachers. Three course coordinators (a local program manager, a local naturalist, and a native English-speaking training coordinator) are trained to run the course, along with a group of six volunteer English teachers. One of the most important activities during this period is the creation of a vision for ecotourism and the role of the guides in each protected area. All partners and supervisors participate in a three-day vision workshop led by a RARE Center facilitator.
- **Course:** Staff, teachers, and students then begin the ten-week intensive course that takes place in isolated training sites located in the protected areas where the guides will work. Both the English and natural history classes are shifted outside

into the surrounding natural environment as much as possible. Each week, students develop and lead "practice" tours that incorporate the interpretive techniques and natural/cultural history information taught during the previous week's lessons. RARE Center's approach to training the guides includes illustrating to the students that the visitors to their parks and protected areas value their natural history stories. The language skills and basic natural and cultural history knowledge necessary to convey those stories are then provided. Unfortunately, this is where most guide training courses end. RARE Center's training takes an additional step of teaching and encouraging the guides to incorporate messages of conservation into those stories, and educate park visitors on the importance of biodiversity protection.

- **Post-Course:** Post-course activities begin with an initial intensive one-month follow-up phase. Guides return to their protected areas and communities accompanied by one of the course instructors and together with their supervisors, they begin to design tours in the area and develop workplans that include conservation activities such as creating environmental education programs in local schools and interpretive trails development. Evaluations are made of each guide's progress and a final report distributed to all partner organizations. The program manager also remains in a support position for an additional five months to help the guides promote their tours, work with collaborators, continue student assessment, and assist the guides where needed.

Results to date

As its programs in Costa Rica, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras have shown, this hands-on approach encourages students, who might otherwise be hindered by self-consciousness, to become enthusiastic and active learners. Such that:

- Nearly 300 rural adults have been trained through eighteen courses.
- Graduates' monthly salaries have increased by an average of 92%.
- Program graduates from the first 11 courses (half of these graduated within the last five years) have already generated *additional* revenue of more than \$1 million (not including revenue from related, non-guiding services).
- In Baja California Sur, 65% of graduates have found employment as nature guides and another 18% are working or studying in conservation or ecotourism-related fields. Seventy percent have initiated or participated in community environmental education programs, and many others have started other local conservation projects.
- In the Yucatan, 76% of graduates are guiding, and more than a dozen have launched ecotourism cooperatives or businesses in their communities. The graduates have also taught environmental education to more than 500 local adults and children in the past year alone.
- In Honduras, the majority of graduates have joined the staffs of the NGOs that manage protected areas, where they are working as nature guides, educators, or public use coordinators.

Local Partners

In order for the program to be successful, it is essential to form strong collaborations with local reserve staff, NGOs, and tour operators. Local partner organizations that sponsor one or more guides during the training are asked to commit to employing or formally collaborating with each guide for a minimum of one year, to ensure that he or she receives sufficient post-course support. The guides' supervisors attend three to six training sessions with NGTP program staff to learn about the program and create work plans with the guides. Local partner organizations may also be asked to pay an inscription fee (10% of the total cost per participant) for each participant in the course.

