Querencia Costa Rica: Local Intentional Community, Global Messenger for Sustainability

Tres Ríos, Costa Rica
Jon Kohl

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Society requires living, learning examples of sustainable practice. The intentional communities movement (i.e., ecovillages) wields power to offer such examples, but throughout Latin America these communities often locate on society’s periphery, populated by well-off foreigners.

Querencia ecovillage, however, integrates green-building and biophilic design, alternative energies, permaculture, and other sustainable practices with social construction methodologies such as consensus, conflict resolution, organizational learning, and intentional cultural design. Querencia uses high-quality heritage interpretation, environmental education, community extension, and tourism to reach local ...
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<th>Cofounder</th>
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<td><strong>Name of your organization</strong></td>
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<td>Querencia Costa Rica</td>
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<td><strong>Organization type</strong></td>
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<td>Private non-profit association, to become a worker cooperative</td>
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**Your idea**

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**Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant**

Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists, Quality of benefit to residents for the destination, Quality of stewardship of the destination.

**Organization size**

Small (1 to 100 employees)

**Indicate sector in which you principally work**

Community Organization

**Year innovation began**

2007

**Indicate sector in which you principally work**


Place your video embed code here from YouTube, Google Video and other video sharing websites. [How to embed a video from YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

Paste your code here
**Innovation**

**What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.**

To develop intentional communities in Latin America that restore sense of belonging and community, local landscapes, and sustainable resource flows.

**Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.**

Society requires living, learning examples of sustainable practice. The intentional communities movement (i.e., ecovillages) wields power to offer such examples, but throughout Latin America these communities often locate on society’s periphery, populated by well-off foreigners.

Querencia ecovillage, however, integrates green-building and biophilic design, alternative energies, permaculture, and other sustainable practices with social construction methodologies such as consensus, conflict resolution, organizational learning, and intentional cultural design. Querencia uses high-quality heritage interpretation, environmental education, community extension, and tourism to reach local schools, neighboring communities, and international tourists to provide vision and tools for those urban and rural, rich and poor.

Thus, Querencia strives toward self-sufficiency, carbon neutrality, zero waste, and an ecological footprint of 1.5 global ha/person by 2020. This vision matches Costa Rica’s goal of carbon neutrality by 2021 and BioRegional/World Wildlife Fund’s One Planet Living goal by 2020. Our forming community has entered into a purchase agreement with a 72-ha cloud forest abutting Tapanti National Park, Costa Rica’s second largest park and principal source of drinking water for its capital city. This will be our heritage, home, and our visitors’ main destination. Allied with government, developers, and citizen organizations, Querencia seeds and retrofits sustainable communities throughout Costa Rica and beyond.

**Explain in detail why your approach is innovative**

Querencia fuses attraction and business. “Attraction” because our community models sustainable technologies, both physical and social, including every bicycle path, organic garden, rooftop water collector, and makes them all work by intentionally designing our daily culture. It restores local character and promotes sense of place.

“Business” because Querencia is a worker cooperative that owns all its assets including terrain, buildings, and equipment; it sells top communication and tourism products using our community and others in Costa Rica as principal tourist attractions. We define tourism broadly to include the many audiences that visit Querencia for enjoyment and education. Our community enterprise, run by middle-class Costa Ricans and foreigners, has the highest quality experiential interpretation visitor center and educational programming to reach out to the world. Our programming interprets topics such as sustainability, intentional communities, geotourism, cooperatives, world heritage, ecological footprint, biodiversity conservation, carbon neutrality, compact cities and smart design.

Our principal interpretive message: “Sustainable and healthy communities have to take great leaps forward to leave small ecological footprints behind, in order to transform our fragmented society into an integral and highly conscious civilization.” Thus we employ geotourism as the central innovation to leverage our community and its message to the world.

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**IDB/Fomin**

**Si perteneces a un país de Latinoamérica y el Caribe tienes la oportunidad de presentar tu iniciativa para acceder a fondos para innovaciones en turismo sostenible del BID/FOMIN (para mayor información leer la sección sobre la oportunidad BID/FOMIN en la página principal del Desafío).**

Deseo postularme.

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Consumidores (viajeros), Operadores de Turismo, Prestatarios de servicios turísticos, Prestatarios de servicios no turísticos (proveedores), Atractivos naturales y culturales.

**Indica cuales de estas tematicas cubre tu innovacion (elige todas aquellas opciones que apliquen)**

Planificación y Gestión de destinos, Innovación y diversificación en el desarrollo de productos turísticos.

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**Impact**

**Describe the degree of success you have had to date. How do you measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact on sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How has it transformed or contributed to the power of place or demonstrated the sustainability of tourism? How does your approach minimize negative impacts?**

We measure success by the pieces falling into place: a highly detailed and internally consistent vision, a business plan, a strengthening group of founders, an alliance with an excited landholder to acquire a nature reserve that could become our home, a long series of interested individuals and organizations who could be future partners, the deep experience we are developing about intentional communities. Our development approach is based on ecovillage guru Diana Leafle Christian’s to establish a successful community with a vision and intentionality to put geotourism to use for sustainability, well beyond the bounds of a small village.

While our community has not yet been built, our concept is now reaching out and influencing how people value intentional communities and tourism in the world. If we achieve becoming a model community for the Costa Rican government’s effort to become carbon neutral and the One Planet Living Program which works with model communities around the world to reach a small ecological footprint, our efforts could reach throughout the world.

As Victor Hugo said, “Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.” We hope to have such an idea.
In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

Middle-class Costa Ricans and myself (permanent resident) have entirely conceived this project. We call on government, foreigners, and international organizations as needed. This way the project develops completely within local cultural boundaries. Once the physical community is established, we will “adopt” Tapanti, a poor community situated near our forested property. Thus far, our project has operated on small funds donated by founding partners.

As David Bornstein observed in his How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas, small organizations with little funding at first, if they survive, are more likely to grow into social movements.

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

Given that satisfaction arises when travelers experience a place and create deeper meaning about their relationship to that place, our interpretive programs provide opportunities to interact behind-the-scenes with communities, members, and sustainable techniques. Our guides help visitors make cognitive and emotional connections between place meanings and sustainability and their own backgrounds. Travelers deepen appreciation while experiencing vernacular building motifs or riding biodiesel wagons or harvesting local strawberries or witnessing clips of group conflict resolution. Because all programs weave global, national, and local issues into their interpretation, ample opportunity exists to make experiences relevant to travelers’ own realities back at home.

Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area’s cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.

We don’t want travelers and residents simply to better understand heritage and environmental issues. We want them to embrace opportunities to actually do something locally. Too many tour operators excite visitors and then let them go home where their enthusiasm saps rapidly with the daily grind of life. They do not provide opportunities at that crucial moment when visitors explore our site and want to help. This is the crux of effective experiential geotourism. We create visitor experiences and thus new bonds with our place that motivate visitors to celebrate and conserve Querencia, Tapanti National Park, and Costa Rica.

Sustainability

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

During start up, founders completely cover operating costs. Our next phase however involves fundraising to finance the imminent down payment on the Tapanti forest property. Thereafter, we form a cooperative that allows us access to economical lines of credit extended by the government to cooperatives and by banks to transparent organizations including cooperatives. This credit would be used to build houses. We expect that our project vision, transparency, and integrity along with effective grant writing and alliances with agencies, private sector, and international organizations can finance the visitor center and sustainability technologies, including trainings. For example the national electricity utility has donated demonstration windmills and solar panels to non-profit organizations such as the Scouts of Costa Rica. Last our own business will generate revenues for operations, land payments, and incremental investments. Our project profile document outlines these different phases, projected funding strategies, and destinations for each kind of revenue.

Soon we will begin our fundraising campaign to co-finance the first phases of development.

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

Our profile outlines six segments. National tourists especially schools always search for meaningful and affordable excursions. General tourists add to their itineraries outstanding destinations in the country. Since no destinations highlight interpretation and few community and sustainability, Querencia fills that niche. International travelers interested in communities and sustainable lifestyles: While there is much competition for such tourists, our mix of physical and social technologies is unique. Groups seeking sustainability training are increasing. Retreat groups have many options here, but our community orientation will be more apt than most. Language learners come for real community experiences in a Spanish environment.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

Just like a car meets the greatest inertia in first gear, our principal challenge is to prove to the world we can do this project. One key is our acquisition of land, which will motivate Costa Ricans to take the project seriously. A property facilitates alliances, fundraising, and inspiration, while a strong community appears invisible to the outside.

Aside from that lack, nurturing community takes time to develop the culture we truly envision and this can result in missed opportunities speeding by. In Latin America there exists a general suspicion of intentional communities as hippy communes and counter-culture radicals. Part of our challenge is to educate the population about to what the intentional communities movement aspires in terms Costa Ricans can understand. Since foreigners own and run most communities here, this challenge falls more squarely on our shoulders. What is more, since Costa Rica is such a well known sustainable tourism destination, we have the additional challenge of mounting a marketing campaign that raises our message of community and sustainability above the frenzied din emanating from this small but active touristic country.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

Until the world arrives at sustainability and an ecological footprint representing each person’s global fair share, our work won’t be done. Querencia has a long-term vision of establishing and retrofitting communities. Some of these communities will participate in outreach, some will not. More likely different communities would specialize in different market segments so that the “Querencias” avoid competition. Similarly, One Planet Living Program envisions sustainability education centers and Costa Rica will need educational resources in other parts of the country, so many options exist and will arise to reach more audiences with more media and hopefully generate more sustainability.
The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

My Costa Rican wife, Marisol, and I, hung a plaque in our University of Wisconsin apartment, which we loved to share with visitors: “We’re green to the core — cut us open and we spill green on the floor.” With such sentiment, little surprise we became fascinated with building our own green house one day. So we worked with a green architect to develop a concept. During our wedding two years later, we asked patrons to hold the flowers thank you, and instead contribute to our green house fund. After Marisol finished her master’s work in Wisconsin, we moved to Washington, D.C. and discovered what the owner described as Washington’s first apartment building, built, not renovated, with green architecture. Perfect while we landed jobs and saved for our house.

Of course this place attracted a demographic much like ours: young, educated, mobile, international, and socially conscious. In order to know these neighbors better, we organized a floor dinner. And then another. And then we added a discussion about green apartment issues. Before long, dinners transformed into a group, which created a freecycle station, printed an electronic newsletter, and then caught on film our “recycling company” using a trash compactor to carry away our recycles, leading to the revelation that the company had no license and subsequently lost its contract with our building.

Within six months, we no longer dreamed of a green house — we really dreamed of a community of green houses. At that point we began to plot our return to Costa Rica, this time with a 15-page concept paper describing our vision of Querencia. Because we were both green to the core and trained in environmental interpretation and education, we knew that our community had to be relevant to average Costa Ricans. The story of foreigners parachuting in, buying up beach-front lots, building English-speaking enclaves, and driving up prices for Costa Ricans, was not one we dared repeat. Because I served in the Peace Corps in Costa Rica, cultural sensitivity and usefulness harkened directly to my two years’ dedicated to the education department at the venerable and crumbling National Zoo.

We recruited friends with experience in tourism, cooperatives, and organizational psychology, so turning our educational community into a tourism business evolved naturally. We fused with another nascent community group with the same vision. When they revealed that their model involved selling lots to foreigners to finance an eco-condominium with minimal Costa Rican involvement, we split off. Instead we researched cooperatives, a globally recognized, transparent, worker-owned business model that upholds the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity.

While we neither yet own land (although we are fundraising for a down payment) nor function as a business, we are intentionally designing a community and culture to be a net of highly interconnected relationships between people. In that sense, we are a community now, searching together like pioneers for a homestead to build into a sustainable home and tourist attraction, from which to reinvent the world.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers’ marketing material.

Several contribute to Querencia; nevertheless, my interests include visitor management in special places and its corresponding tools: heritage interpretation, creating spaces to protect visitors and resources, involving visitors in managing places by aligning conditions for transformative experiences that create new meaning and relationships with places. I work with UNESCO’s World Heritage Center's Public Use Planning Program to help parks develop these capacities. I serve as interpretive planner and trainer for a sustainable tourism planning company, Fermata, Inc. I write for popular, trade, and peer-reviewed publications on systems thinking, training, heritage interpretation, community, ecotourism, park management, biodiversity conservation, etc. Visit www.jonkoff.com

Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

Imagine witnessing 10,000 years of human history and communities built and lost. Querencia’s flagship Global Communities Tour interprets worldwide community evolution right here in Costa Rica. In a tourist village auditorium in the capital, living historians and multimedia interpret indigenous communities that arrived millennia ago, then early settler communities.

After this introduction, our tour instructor trained in interpretation and communities leads tourists around the country to experience different kinds of communities. Visitors garden in a mountain commune, practice yoga in a spiritual ecovillage, lunch with locals from a conventional low-income urban barrio, and end at Querencia. The guide leads tourists into the visitor center that prepares them to interact knowledgeably and respectfully with the real community behind the center. In a model unit, visitors learn how countless cultures have led to today’s emerging sustainable design of built and social spaces that create sense of place and belonging. Visitors then hike into our mountain rainforest to learn how communities can manage lands in different parts of the world.

The tour climaxes with an overnight to our sacred grove and a theatrical performance that presages future communities once sustainability and community cohesion become deeply rooted in society.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

Querencia’s strategy calls for an alliance with a landholder and green developer. This trio, along with advisors from the government climate change office, an outbound ecotour operator, gurus in conservation and interpretation, will propose to BioRegional/World Wildlife Fund’s One Planet Living Program to adopt us as a model community. Other planned alliances include a 501(c)3 friends group, international organizations that promote sustainability and community building, donors who want to leverage our innovative mix of visitor management and sustainability, and the agency overseeing cooperatives in Costa Rica. Like Gaviotas community in Colombia, Querencia exports technologies and media relevant to communities abroad.

Source URL: https://www.changemakers.com/geotourismchallenge/entries/querencia-costa-rica-local-intentional-community#comment-0