



New Model Mends Conservation, Community, and Business Gains in Mexico

By CHRIS PESENTI

In the realm of sea turtle conservation, private enterprise is rarely considered a lead player. At best, it fills a supporting role through corporate financing of conservation projects, but more often it plays the villain. Mexico's tourism industry, in particular, has earned a bad reputation for the destruction of vital nesting habitats through coastal development, and the relationship between the tourism and conservation sectors is sometimes toxic. But with tourism being one of the country's largest sources of revenue, Mexico needs tangible efforts that seek common ground between tourism and conservation sectors.

RED Sustainable Travel (RED) has developed an innovative and positive role for the tourism sector in sea turtle conservation by combining a for-profit tour operator with a conservation nonprofit to create a hybrid social enterprise that is achieving both community development and conservation objectives. RED uses tourism as a tool to address many of the challenges that conservation projects face, including raising funds, pursuing communication and awareness goals, building community support and alliances, and engaging local stewards of natural resources. We believe that RED can serve as an innovative model that can be replicated in other sites around the world.

The nonprofit component of RED implements an array of community development and conservation activities, including community business incubation, training, and environmental education projects—all of which are standard activities for a nonprofit. What makes RED different, however, is that the nonprofit is directly linked to a sister corporation that shares the same community development and conservation objectives but uses a for-profit business model.

The for-profit entity develops, markets, and operates Conservation Adventures; partners with community enterprises; and directly employs individuals in rural communities. RED's hybrid model generates both social and economic benefits, often (and ideally) blurring the lines between the two.

In an average five- to six-month season, RED's trip fees finance 100 percent of more than a dozen in-water sea turtle monitoring projects, including the costs of equipment, operations, and staffing. Funds raised through RED trips also finance Academic Adventures for about 50 youth from rural communities each year, which generates local awareness of the importance of sea turtles, mangrove and dune ecosystems, and sustainable fisheries. RED also engages hundreds of Mexican and international travelers each year in hands-on sea turtle research and conservation. These travelers become project ambassadors, spreading the word as storytellers of their personal experience and of the important work performed by RED and its partners such as Grupo Tortuguero.

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RED's conservation results are bolstered by important social and economic influences as well. In a typical season, RED sea turtle monitoring trips generate more than 375 person-days of nonextractive employment and close to \$40,000 in income for local residents. To maximize these impacts, RED targets key actors, such as fishermen and poachers who directly interact with natural resources. For example, RED's camp in Magdalena Bay employs a chef once renowned for his *caguamada* (sea turtle stew), a practice he has now willingly abandoned. After his experience with RED, he even took it upon himself to recruit an individual known as the *mega-guatero*, or "big-time sea turtle poacher," as a new RED staff member. In effect, fishermen are recruiting fishermen.

The interactions that take place in RED Conservation Adventures create a two-way street. Travelers originally drawn to the sea turtle experience often walk away having been deeply affected by the human experience and the bonds they form with local fishermen. Conversely, fishermen's interactions with travelers—Mexicans and internationals alike—fill them with a sense of pride in their work and in their unique knowledge of nature.

Although RED's non-profit vehicle generates its own important impacts and the hybrid nature of RED contributes to cross-pollination between the two entities, the results described are, for the most part, products of the *for-profit* vehicle. To understand what makes RED an innovator, one should look beyond the results to the nature of the model.

RED provides nontraditional funding for conservation activities. Trip fees support conservation activities, in particular sea turtle monitoring performed by Grupo Tortuguero. This structure helps to diversify revenue so that the projects can better weather the inevitable changes in funding streams, such as shifts in foundation priorities. Moreover, RED donations are unrestricted and can be used where they are most needed. For example, RED can support activities such as exploratory research and monitoring, which an organization with restricted donations might find difficult to fund.

RED furthers conservation goals by aiding local residents. Employment opportunities are hard to come by in rural communities, typically for coastal fishermen, and family economic unease consistently trumps concern over natural resources. RED provides training, attractive wages, benefits such as social security and insurance, and dignified employment in a positive environment. Dedication to conservation is never a requirement for employment, but rather RED seeks in its staff members a willingness to be part of the team and to perform given tasks while keeping an open mind. This means that RED is able to attract a broader range of participants than a typical conservation project. After working with others in a positive environment, interacting with travelers, and finding a place to grow and express their own knowledge, staff members' perspectives change, and the conservation mind-set follows. The contract is based on economics, but the experience builds stewardship, one fisherman at a time.

RED builds multisector alliances. Partnerships are pursued with any and all willing actors, including government agencies such as CONANP (Natural Protected Area Commission), SEDESOL (Secretary for Social Development), and SECTUR (Secretary of Tourism). Although economic development is the responsibility of all these

agencies, they often lack the resources and technical capacity to implement economic development projects. The possibility of participating in self-driven projects with capable partners presents an attractive opportunity for collaborations that lead to tangible results. For instance, in Cabo Pulmo, home to foraging hawksbill turtles, RED is currently working with CONANP to develop a program that will involve tourists in coral reef monitoring, generating both funding and free labor for a program in need of resources. RED also partners with regional tour operators that seek innovative tourism products that promote social and conservation objectives.

RED uses a business approach. Although many nonprofit conservation groups identify tourism as a way to achieve their goals, few have the technical skills, experience, and professional networks to implement tourism businesses in a highly competitive market. RED leverages its marketing and operational experience to work with conservation partners to source and carry products to market and, along the way, transfer skills to its partners. As a for-profit tour operator with a growing client base, RED is constantly driven to develop new products. RED's business know-how closes the gap between conservation and market-based tools by creating innovative products out of projects. For example, in the region between La Paz and Loreto in Baja California Sur, RED is developing products that will involve travelers in conservation programs such as fish counts and tracking of bighorn sheep and mountain cats. Other tour operators will seek these new products, thereby amplifying RED's impact and strengthening the financial viability of the conservation efforts.

Building community support and momentum is one of the greatest challenges faced by conservation NGOs. Social change in communities takes years, sometimes generations, and it can stall, leaving conservationists with no clear path forward. Although RED's nonprofit entity faces the same challenge, RED's business vehicle competitively forges ahead to provide products and services. In 2013 in Magdalena Bay, social conflict between fishermen and conservation interests forced much of the sea turtle work in the zone to cease; but as a business and economic driver in the community, RED was able to maintain its operations in spite of this conflict. Therefore, it was able to continue financing and carrying out sea turtle monitoring in conjunction with Grupo Tortuguero.

Mexico is just the beginning. RED has real potential for replication and adaptation in other parts of the world that face similar challenges. We recognize that every situation is unique and that conservation-focused tourism forms just one part of an integrated conservation strategy. But considering the scale of the tourism industry and its direct ties to environmental health (for better and for worse), we believe this model holds great promise as a tool for sea turtle conservation. ■

AT LEFT: Tourists watch in Baja California, Mexico, as a fisherman conducts in-water sea turtle monitoring. © KAREN DELANEY WOLVERTON