

## Organic coffee pays off in more ways than one

by Erica Schlaikjer

November 2005

Selling stuffed toy monkeys to raise money for a volunteer project just wasn't cutting it anymore for Elise Wach and Sean Carney, the co-founders of Volunteer Costa Rica, a non-profit organization dedicated to environmental issues.



After organizing their first successful volunteer project in Costa Rica during Spring Break 2004, Wach and Carney wanted to find a better way to finance their group's next annual trip. The University of Southern California students brainstormed fundraising ideas that would not only raise money, but also increase awareness about sustainable development and the conservation of natural resources.

"We don't want to sell stupid stuff that doesn't mean anything," says Wach, an environmental biology major. "So I thought, what if we sold organic coffee, instead?"

Wach contacted Nolan Quiros, the Center Director for the School for Field Studies (SFS) program in Costa Rica, whom she knew from her own SFS study abroad experience during her junior year.

SFS is a Massachusetts-based educational institution that provides interdisciplinary field-based programs around the world, including Costa Rica, Turks and Caicos, Kenya, Mexico and Australia, to students interested in environmental research and the sustainable management of natural resources.

The SFS Center for Sustainable Development Studies in Atenas, Costa Rica has worked with local small-scale coffee producers for the past six years to help them transition from traditional farming to certified-organic production. The switch not only helps the farmers be more competitive in the global economy, but it also improves their physical health and the environment, as a whole.

Last year, the farmers produced 12,000 kilos of organic coffee, according to SFS President Paul Houlihan. Some of it was sold directly to wholesale buyers supplying Starbucks; another portion was sold to the SFS students, including Wach from Volunteer Costa Rica.

Under Wach's leadership, Volunteer Costa Rica succeeded in bringing about a ton of coffee back to the USC campus, Wach says. Student volunteers sold the coffee to family and friends for \$10 per half-kilo bag, which is cheaper than the current U.S. market price. The proceeds helped cut food, travel and lodging expenses for Volunteer Costa Rica trip participants, bringing the program cost down to \$400 per student. Profits were donated to ASCOMOTI, a Costa Rican conservation group.

Meanwhile, the farmers back in Costa Rica also profited: The coffee they sold to the SFS students pulled in 36% more than the conventional selling process.

"We gave them more than Starbucks offered them for the same coffee," Wach says. "They were ecstatic."

Previously, the small-scale traditional coffee farmers earned \$1 per kilo of coffee they produced. By switching to organic, they were able to net 300% more income, at \$3 per kilo.

"A big burden was lifted off their backs," Wach says.

The eight farmers of Atenas also formed a grassroots "co-op", named APROCAFE (Asociacion de Productores de Café), collectively working to increase their revenue and diversify their products in the long-term.

Houlihan says the farmers are still "at the bottom of the food chain," compared to wholesale buyers and final consumers.

He says SFS is trying to help the farmers eliminate as many middlemen as possible so the coffee can go directly from Costa Rica to buyers, like Volunteer Costa Rica at USC.

But the overall goal of SFS focuses on environmental sustainability, rather than competing with big food suppliers.

"SFS is not getting into the coffee sales business," Houlihan says. "We're just trying to help facilitate and do research for the farmers."

Wach says she ran into problems selling the coffee on campus because of the university's strict policies and existing contracts with food suppliers.

"There are so many politics at USC," she says. "[The school's coffee shops] didn't want competition."

Houlihan says there may be creative ways for students to sell the coffee in their college store or as a fundraiser for campus clubs and activities.

"We're not naively assuming college cafeterias are going to buy the coffee," Houlihan says. "We're hoping students can work with the administration to identify other ways to sell it."

>>If you would like to bring organic coffee to your campus, contact SFS President Paul Houlihan at [phoulihan@fieldstudies.org](mailto:phoulihan@fieldstudies.org).