



SUCCESS STORY

Promoting Environmental Awareness

Community builds on local knowledge and skills to conserve wildlife and diversify income sources



Photo: Todd Bertwell

Ernestina teaches a fellow community member how to select pine needles to make artisan crafts. She and three other women taught a total of 30 participants a mix of traditional and new handicraft techniques, of whom at least five have sold products they learned to make, while more have made products for their own use or given as gifts.

“Through the series of workshops concluding with the environmental fair through which the Biological Monitoring Group shared two years’ worth of wildlife observations, the people of El Toro improved their knowledge of the local species and are more careful about how they dispose of their garbage.”

Ma. Eugenia Mendiola González
Department Head
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Sierra Gorda Guanajuato Biosphere Reserve

Telling Our Story

U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

“We had more trees, more rain and milder seasons. Now it feels hot year round. And there is more litter.” says Ernestina, 34, of her home town of El Toro, located in a remote corner of the Sierra Gorda Guanajuato Biosphere Reserve. She and her husband struggle to sustain themselves and their two young daughters, but Ernestina looks for creative solutions, for example by making artisan crafts and jewelry out of locally abundant pine needles. She also observes local wildlife as a member of the local Biological Monitoring Group, a team formed and trained with the support of the Mexican National Commission for Natural Protected Areas (CONANP).

Since Peace Corps volunteer Todd Bertwell began his service in El Toro in August 2017, Ernestina consistently served as his ally in project implementation. When he suggested that the community solicit USAID Small Project Assistance funds to strengthen community resilience to climate change, Ernestina was the first to suggest that they could promote art as an alternative income source. For the first activity of the USAID project “Sharing Environmental Consciousness Across Generations”, she and her sister-in-law taught twenty women and men how to craft tortilla dishes, trays, bowls, and keychains using pine needles. Ernestina then helped Todd and the community authority expand the town’s garbage collection system from one to six containers, making it easier for people to properly dispose of their waste. Next she, another adult and thirteen children, most of whom had never before performed for an audience, acted in a community play to interpret Mexican folk tales about wild animals and traditional cultivation. Finally, for the community environmental fair designed to share the first two years of the Biological Monitoring Group’s observations to the public, Ernestina led the artisan craft exposition section, where she and five other local artists presented their work. Through the fair and related environmental workshops, over one hundred total participants gained knowledge in climate change, habitat conservation in natural protected areas and local wildlife, and skills in biodiversity monitoring, solid waste management, performing arts, and handicrafts.

Ernestina, instrumental in the planning and implementation of the USAID project, hopes that her community will continue to grow its appreciation and understanding of its resources, biodiversity, and culture of the Sierra Gorda Guanajuato. Throughout his two years of service, Todd has seen her improve her photography and bird identification skills and begin to take her pine needle crafts to sell in larger towns. Ernestina is proof that people in even the most marginal conditions can overcome their struggles and improve life for themselves and for their communities.