

# community crafts and culture

Empowering indigenous communities for a sustainable future



## About the project

Community Crafts and Culture is a collaborative community project coordinated by the Museums, Galleries and Collections Institute (MGCI) at the University of St Andrews. This SFC GCRF project sought to support and empower three indigenous communities identified by the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica towards a sustainable future, through a collaborative fit-for-purpose practical solution to problems identified by the communities relating their artisan production and promotion.

## Partnerships

The University of St Andrews in Scotland: Coordinator Dr Karen Brown and Researcher Jamie Allan Brown; the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica and the Red de Museos Comunitarios de Costa Rica: Ronald Martínez Villarreal; students from the University of Costa Rica: Tatiana Muñoz Brenes and Alejandro Soto; International Council of Museums (ICOM) Costa Rica: President Laurant Bonilla-Merchav, and ICOM Regional Alliance for Latin America and the Caribbean President, Samuel Franco Arce.



## Working with the community

The project engaged three local museums and their communities in Costa Rica: Rey Curré Yimba Cajc and Boruca in the south, and the Ecomuseo Chorotega San Vicente de Nicoya in the north. All three are located in very remote and difficult to reach areas with poor infrastructure to attract secure and regular tourism. At the same time, their crafts are sold by third-party sellers at the international airport and gift shops in Costa Rica's tourist areas. The project sought to empower the communities through increasing capacities and skills through tailored workshops and intergenerational activities involving both the young and old within the communities.

## Community mapping and documenting

Researchers pursued an asset-mapping approach by supporting community leaders and young people, paired with University of Costa Rica students, to define the boundary of each community, explore its geographical contours and raw materials, and identify artisans and significant sites of interest. The results of this approach have been applied to the project's collaborative map, addressing the connection between the community, its landscape and its artisans. The map has been used to promote the communities both locally and for tourism.



## Empowering women

The project has facilitated community discussions contributing to the increased participation of local women in decision-making processes. Building on existing matriarchal structures to further empower women economically and socially, an example of this is the ambition of the Boruca's museum association (now led by women) to expand their successful community museum into a hub for the community, enterprise, heritage and tourist activity. Their aim to expand the museum, open a garden growing indigenous herbs, fruits and plants and use these for a museum cafe.



## Disaster resilience and preparation

In October 2017, all three communities suffered severe flooding, with Rey Curré being the most affected by the tropical storm Nate. In collaboration with ICOM, the project delivered a community disaster preparedness workshops in San Jose and the UNESCO World Heritage Site Finca 6 near to both Rey Curré Yimba Cajc and Boruca. Samuel Franco Acre, an internationally renowned expert on disaster preparedness, facilitated the programme in collaboration with us and Laurant Bonilla-Merchav, President of ICOM Costa Rica, inviting both local community representatives and emergency response professionals. Adhering to the International Committee of the Blue Shield standards, the programme addressed how to coordinate preparations to meet and respond to emergency situations, promoting international standards in risk assessment and management, and how to recover and store cultural objects until they can be rehomed. To document Rey Curré Yimba Cajc's resilience, the researchers filmed the experiences of the local community in their village, showing the impact of flooding on the community museum and local heritage and documenting how the community responded to the floods.

## Project objectives

Through a process of consultation and collaboration with the indigenous communities, five project objectives were outlined:

- (1). To build on existing partnerships, from local community groups to national and international organisations;
- (2). To empower local women to take ownership of selling their crafts;
- (3). To support the communities by helping them acquire the necessary skills to promote their crafts;
- (4). To evaluate and harness the knowledge gained through the project across the wider Community Museums Network of the Americas; and
- (5). To build on the increased capacity of an empowered community towards a broader project throughout Latin America in the future.



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