

# PSITTAScene

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## IT TAKES A VILLAGE: The Volunteers of the Ara Project

Bo, a recent high school graduate from Vermont, was probably wondering how he'd drawn the short straw. I had sidled up to him as the morning staff meeting was getting under way. The meeting was in Spanish, and I thought I might lean on him for translation duty.

I was visiting the Ara project's field site in Costa Rica. This particular field site was at Punta Islita, a small, end-of-the-road town on the drier, Pacific side of the country. Remote, sunny, beautiful... I could see why volunteers would like it here. I caught myself scanning the shade for hammocks. My siesta-on-the-beach musing didn't last for long.

The staff meeting started at 8 AM sharp. Not at the beginning of the work day, mind you, but after the crew had already been working for 2 hours, chopping fruit and veggies, cleaning food and water bowls, checking on birds and delivering breakfast to the parrots. The Islita parrot family includes some 150 birds, mostly Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*), housed in a dozen aviaries scattered widely around the park-like grounds.

Perhaps the 8 o'clock meeting start is for practical reasons. It's hard to hear oneself think, much less hold an orderly staff meeting, when the macaws want their breakfast. As the volunteers wandered into the kitchen meeting area, I wondered, where are the chairs? I've been to plenty of staff meetings in my day, and every meeting had chairs. Not this one. This was the Islita "stand-up" staff meeting, intended to keep things moving—crisply, efficiently. Imagine!

The meeting was led by Celine, a petite, 20-something veterinarian from France. Her veterinary skills contribute greatly to the ongoing testing for disease and parasites, fine-tuning of diets, and development of sanitation protocols to keep these birds in the picture of health. Besides Celine and Bo, those attending included Fabio, a laborer from the local community; Mauricio, a biologist from Mexico, and Alina and Julia—two volunteers from Germany. Absent was the Ara Project's Executive Director, Dr. Sam Williams (UK) who was driving a departing volunteer, Sophie (Netherlands) to the bus station and picking

up a new volunteer. Also absent on this Sunday morning was the Islita manager, Angharad, from Australia, who was taking her day off (although she led a tour that afternoon). These were people that were drawn here from all corners of the globe with one desire in common—helping parrots.

All, except Fabio and I, could communicate in 2 or 3 different languages. The meeting was conducted in Spanish. When someone struggled to find a word, there was lots of help. Although these volunteers probably hadn't signed up for Spanish learning, this was certainly a side benefit.

Celine went around the room, asking every person for a quick report on what they'd observed this morning. How were their birds? What needed work? What were their priorities for the day? The reports from the volunteers were varied. A stuck lock on Aviary 9B; a pair in Aviary 7 was showing signs of nesting (yea!); the disinfecting solution in the footbaths was too weak.

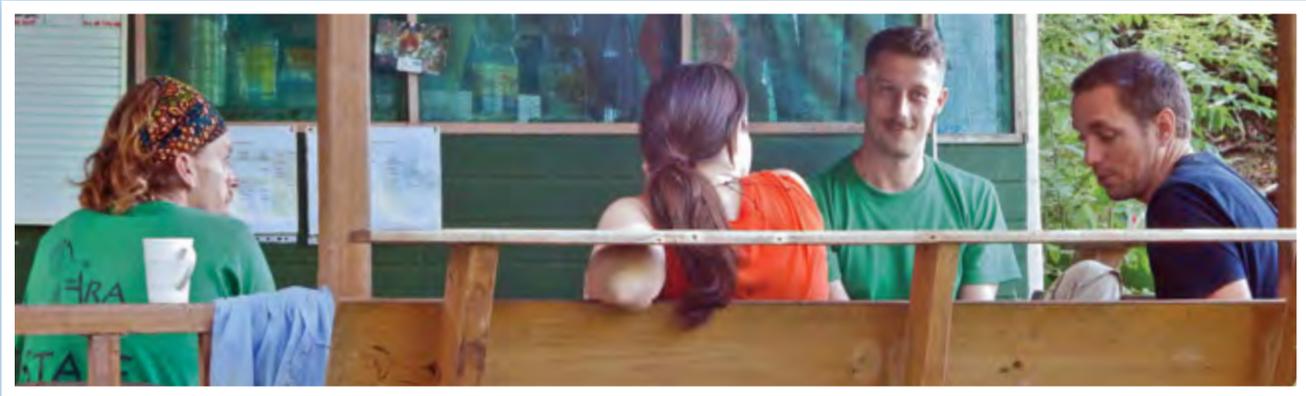
Everyone had their set jobs for the day...building nest boxes, cleaning aviaries, feeding birds, building trails. It was a cooperative team approach to setting the priorities, and there was no lack of work. The volunteers kept their eyes open for problems and maintenance issues that needed addressing; Celine scribbled these on a white board. If anyone finished their regular jobs early, they could consult the board, and tick it off the list.

I wondered, how did the volunteers "really" feel about this project? After hours, I approached them individually for honest opinions about what they liked, or disliked about the experience. I found that they all valued making a contribution that mattered. No one liked doing "busy work", or worse, having no work.

The two volunteers from Germany had made an extended time commitment to volunteering. This was the 4th project they'd worked on, and they graded it near the top. They liked the collaborative aspects, the education they were getting, and the feeling of making a difference. And they liked the people they were living and working with. This group clearly enjoyed one another's company.



**Upper left:** A Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambiguus*) forages amongst blossoms. **Upper right:** A homemade nest barrel awaits occupants. **Centre left:** Volunteer Tom climbs high up to check on a nest barrel. **Centre right:** Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) form a pinwheel around a feeder. **Lower left and right:** Staff members Angharad and Mauricio discuss parrot care.



Dr. Sam Williams (far right) chats with staff and volunteers

Later that day, I tagged along with a group of tourists that Angharad was guiding around the grounds. They hung on her every word, which didn't surprise, given her knowledge and articulate style. She also had presence and a ready smile, making her pleasantly approachable.

She explained the purpose of the Ara Project to the visitors. Although some of the breeding birds were rescues, this was not a rescue facility. This was a conservation effort, she noted, aimed at re-introducing wild populations throughout Costa Rica - restoring populations that had been depleted through habitat loss and decades of exploitation for the pet trade.

As we made our way up the dusty road to the visitor center/kitchen/living quarters, we were stopped in our tracks by the raucous arrival of a dozen brilliant Scarlet Macaws to feeders in a large tree just below the roadside. The birds began squawking and capering around the platform, looking for their favourite foods. Their already vivid colours were splendidly enhanced in the sunshine.

The stars of the tour had arrived, providing an apt exclamation point to the tour experience. People were in awe, and for the next 15 minutes, cameras clicked and whirred. Then, as Angharad wrapped up her talk, and the tour vans idled waiting to deliver guests back to their hotel, three or four were plainly reluctant to leave. They wanted to know what more they could do, besides leaving a donation in the jar on the table, or buying the parrot-themed t-shirts and artwork.

An engineer from the UK offered Angharad his card, saying if the project needed any engineering services - buildings, sanitation systems - to contact him. He'd draw up plans for free. Angharad received the offer warmly, with thanks. This wasn't new to her. It typified the giving spirit not only of tourists, but of the people she was working and living with.

As Angharad packed up the local artwork and display materials, I quietly slipped a bill into the donation jar. Based on what I'd observed the last few days, the people I met, and the extraordinary macaws, I couldn't imagine a better investment. 📷

## About the Author

**Matt Kirchhoff** is the Communications Director for the World Parrot Trust. A retired wildlife research biologist with experience serving on various nonprofit boards, he volunteers for the World Parrot Trust, working from his home in Anchorage, Alaska.



## About the Ara Project

The Ara Project is a Costa Rican licensed, government-supervised, conservation organization operated by the non-profit organization Asociación El Proyecto Ara. Its primary purpose is focused on reintroducing macaws to their former ranges throughout Costa Rica. To learn more about volunteer opportunities at the Ara Project, visit their website at [thearaproject.org](http://thearaproject.org).

