

2011 Costa Rican Equitarian Workshop



The first Costa Rican Equitarian Workshop took place from March 11-20th, 2011. Dr. Mario Lopez and I (Dr. Adrienne Otto), representing the Equitarians, arrived from Ontario and Western North Carolina respectively. Our three Costa Rican counterparts, Dra. Yesinia ‘Yesse’ Alpizar Naranjo, and Drs. Jose Daniel Fernandez R. and Ricardo Alfaro Paniagua, completed the veterinary team.

Our primary focus included five communities on the Osa peninsula, one of the more remote areas of Costa Rica. In addition, we also managed to squeeze in about 100 horses from the mountains surrounding the central Pacific coast community of Parrita, about halfway between the capital of San Jose and the Osa.

The Osa peninsula is in the southern most pacific zone of Costa Rica, a ‘stone’s throw’ from Panama. The region is best known for thick, humid, tropical rainforests, the Corcovado National Park, and the incredible biodiversity represented. The lowlands are dotted with high-impact agriculture, such as African palm oil plantations, rice, and cattle ranching, while the higher elevations support subsistence farmers, indigenous communities, and a growing eco-tourism industry.

Freshly enthusiastic from the October 2010 Veracruz workshop, the following month I first spoke with Dr. Ricardo Alfaro Paniagua about the possibility of promoting a Costa Rican workshop. Dr. Alfaro a solo mixed animal practitioner in Puerto Jimenez, a colorful ‘frontier town. As is typical in rural Costa Rica, Dr. Ricardo’s veterinary practice also includes a thriving agricultural supply and pet care business. But, despite his extremely busy schedule he quickly identified communities, contacted their leaders, explaining our mission, and ultimately organizing the venues for our work on the Osa peninsula.



From our base at the modest Hotel Oro Verde (‘green gold’) conveniently located above his veterinary practice, we met Dr. Ricardo each morning, load the vehicle and were usually on the road, by 6:30 or so. Daily travel times to each community varied from a gentle drive, to several hours on four wheel drive roads. Thanks largely to Dr. Ricardo; each venue came off without a hitch. We had plenty of cheerful help, usually an excellent lunch, and always a plethora of patients that arrived from kilometers away in many cases. A true Equitarian, Dr. Alfaro generously donated medications, disinfectants and whatever was in short supply. He even managed to find a liter of distilled water for our EIA tests, something I had been told was impossible to acquire outside of San Jose.



Our first venue on the Osa was Lago Alto, an Indigenous Reservation. The community was very remote, and had minimal amenities. Several rivers had to be traversed to reach the community and the final muddy hill was too much for our 4x4; we resorted to packing our supplies the last several hundred meters to the soccer field where our patients were assembled. We saw a lot of very thin horses, foot problems, dental problems and respiratory issues.



Vampire bats were reported to be a more serious problem this year. Many of the women wore traditional dress, and at the end of the day, the community members showed their appreciation by inviting us to imbibe in their local fermented corn beverage, 'Quichua'.

Days two and three were spent in the mountains in the vicinity of Drake Bay. Tourism is very important to the economy here, and horse trekking as well as the usual day-laboring on cattle ranches, augments subsistence farming. Of the two Drake Bay communities, the animals at Progreso had higher BCS, fewer respiratory problems and fewer insect problems. Comparatively,

animals at Bahia Drake suffered from ticks and biting insects, had more respiratory issues and lower BCS. Several days later, when we were able to analyze our blood samples, it became evident that 'clinically affected animals were more likely to be EIA positive. It is important to recognize that our 'clinical' data was subjective, and certainly subject to bias between the three observers. Although far from conclusive, the observed correlation does support the need for further research. Interestingly we saw two of our most severe respiratory cases at Bahia Drake, one presumed fungal infection and another horse with what appeared to be a severe sinus issue.

The fourth day was one of our busiest. Only 20 km outside of Puerto Jimenez, the road to Miramar was both challenging and scenic. The farm where our patients were assembled was very remote, at the very end of the 'road', but the setting was truly spectacular. We had spring water and a generator at our disposal. Many of the patients arrived from several hours ride away, over rough terrain. As well as the 'usual' we treated several injuries, sick and septic foals and chronically open wounds. As usual, we finished our work at dark, which falls rapidly in the tropics. When we arrived back in Puerto Jimenez we found a tiny Chihuahua, in need of a C-section, and Dr. Ricardo's expertise. Dr. Mario and I assisted in the prep, surgery and aftercare. It was not the surgical suite most of us are accustomed to, but Dr. Alfaro performed the procedure with superb accuracy, speed and compassion. The patient did great. Later that evening, after a fish sandwich, Dr. Mario and I launched into our first EIA assay. Using the small airless bathroom in my hotel room (it had the best light) we knocked out the first 48 samples before midnight, and were immediately struck by the preponderance of EIA.

Our final (fifth) day on the Osa was fairly short, only about 6 hours in the field, including a terrific lunch with the family that

Naranjo and Dr. Jose Daniel Fernandez. Dr. Fernandez, an exclusive equine practitioner from near San Jose, volunteered a sacred Saturday to join our team, and Dra. 'Yesse' hired a relief vet to cover her busy solo mixed animal practice for the entire two days we worked in this area. The final afternoon ended with two castrations, performed by Dr. Yesse. It was a terrific wrap-up, and we were all very grateful for the opportunity to learn from and practice with the help of one another.



Despite the onset of the tropical night, our workday was not over. Thankfully, we had access to a marvelously air-conditioned and spacious laundry room with good light, to run our last batch of EIA blood samples. The task took most of the night, but the next morning we were back on the road to the Juan Santa Maria Airport, and Dr. Mario's flight home to Canada. Overall, the First Annual Costa Rican Equitarian workshop went remarkably well. With over 250 patients seen, we addressed a lot of foot issues and Dr. Mario held several mini-workshops with handouts about improving foot care. We handed out rasps and a few other farrier items to those in the community intent in sustainable improvement of overall hoof care health.

No patients had a history of intestinal parasite checks, and few had been de-wormed with any regularity. So, we ended up de-worming virtually every equid we saw, utilizing either Equimax or fenbendazole depending on age, BCS, concurrent problems and availability (we went through a lot of de-wormer). Equally important, we held dialog with owners and community leaders regarding parasites, de-wormers and frequency of administration. Use of the PowerFloat, made quick work of some serious mal-occlusion, and all the docs enjoyed having a turn with the equipment. Thanks to Pfizer's generous donation of Domosidan we were able to provide excellent sedation, even to the weaker patients.



All animals treated were working animals. Their primary jobs seemed to be transportation: of goods, including beans, corn, humans and propane bottles. Usually there is also year-around work on cattle ranches, and at harvest time, the animals pulls carts for the palm oil plantations. In Drake Bay, a primary use was tourism. Many of the animals were presented by children and occasionally by women. Overall, the humans were extremely dependant on their equids and were generally very interested to learn what they could do to improve their animal's life-long condition.

None of this could have been accomplished without the relationships that developed with our Costa Rican colleagues. We

had a great time, learned a lot from one another and, in the end, it seemed like we were taking leave of old friends instead of new ones. Next year's workshop will most likely be held in February. We are almost certain to have substantially more patients so hopefully also more veterinarians, both from 'here' and Costa Rican. Certainly we will see Dra. Yesse and Drs. Ricardo and Jose again, and the veterinary school will be able to be more active in February.

I hope this was informative and with luck , inspirational. Anyone interested in next year's workshop, or with any questions, please write!

Regarding EIA: The full report of our data will be out soon. We plan to continue to think about the relationship between parasites, illness and EIA, and hope to pursue a project addressing ecto-parasite control, specifically and how it may decrease not only EIA, but West Nile Virus, Babesia, and Equine Encephalitis in these animals.

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