



**HIGH ON VICTORY**  
Photo by Ronald Reyes



*Melisa Solís, representing Coronado canton, clears a pole this week at the 28th annual National Games in Heredia, north of San José. One of more than 4,000 competitors, Solís finished first in the high-jump contest.*

More photos and coverage on Page 2 ▶

**NEWS**  
Country Recognized For Environmental Performance

On the heels of a decree that will protect marine animals, the country ranked high in an international environmental survey. **Page 6 ▶**

**BUSINESS**  
Export Growth Sluggish, Some Sectors Weaker

Decreased activity in agricultural and industrial exports such as plastics, chemicals and textiles resulted in slower export growth last year. **Page 17 ▶**

**\$178M Budget Surplus Is First in Half a Century**

The government finished 2007 with the first budget surplus since the 1950s due largely to improved tax collection that improved revenues. **Page 19 ▶**

**WEEKEND**  
German Swimmer Takes On Pacific Coast

Renate Herberger, 52, below, plans to swim the length of Costa Rica's Pacific coast in the coming weeks to raise awareness of marine ecosystems. **Page W1 ▶**



# Another Pacific Poop Problem

*Posh hotel stopped discharge into estuary but sewage now goes to a nearby town*

By Dave Sherwood  
Tico Times Staff

PLAYA PANAMA, Guanacaste – Guests enjoying their morning minute on the lavish toilets of the Hotel Allegro Papagayo may be surprised to find out where last night's dinner went.

Residents in El Gallo de Liberia, a half hour away, certainly were when they started smelling it in their backyards. The sewage, which officials say is being trucked to the town, is also threatening to contaminate the local water supply and a nearby river. The discovery came after nine months of detective work by municipal officials, who pieced together the clues with help from local activists and community groups. In February, the environment ministry (MINAE) revealed the 300-room hotel – part of the government's Papagayo Tourism Project, the largest development in the northwestern province of Guanacaste – was

dumping raw sewage directly into the estuary beside the hotel. Government inspectors were outraged. Local prosecutor Juan José Soto asked for "the complete closure of the hotel due to the volume of sewage that is contaminating the area," according to an "urgent" request he filed with the chief prosecutor of Liberia. On April 24, hotel manager Guillermo Guerra responded: "Since the receipt of your letter, the problem of discharges was immediately corrected, totally eliminating the problem of the estuary." Guerra assured inspectors that his "facilities were adequate" for the upcoming May to **Page 9 ▶**

**THE NICA TIMES**

Chávez Promises The Moon  
Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez told Nicaragua he will solve its problems and keep the country afloat.



# Boa, That's a Big Snake

*Escazú resident returns home to find 8-foot snake in engine compartment*

By Peter Krupa  
Tico Times Staff

Ah, tropical living. It has everything: piña coladas, swaying palms, rosy sunsets... the eight-foot-long boa wrapped around the

engine block of your sport utility vehicle. That's what expatriate Jan Romeu found last week when she returned to her San Rafael de Escazú home, west of San José, after a short trip. The water-pump repairman tipped her off to the snake's presence after he saw it peering out at him from an opening. "The guy says, 'Lady, do you know you have a big snake in your car?'" Romeu said. "I thought he was joking. But he wasn't." Lifting the hood, Romeu and her gardener **Page 14 ▶**

# Victim's Friends Mobilize After Death at Tamarindo

By Alex Leff  
Tico Times Staff

Friends of Matt McParland, the 42-year-old U.S. chiropractor who drowned recently while on vacation in Tamarindo, are doing more than mourning his death. Frustrated by the thought that McParland might still be alive if the beach's privately funded lifeguard program had not been dropped four months before, some of **Page 14 ▶**

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# Townsfolk Angered Over Dumping

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November "off season" and that the hotel had contracted "a thorough expert analysis with a recognized firm in Costa Rica" to prepare an "improvement" of their treatment plant.

Notably absent from the letter, say officials, was any indication of how the all-inclusive hotel had "eliminated the problem" in the estuary, or where they planned to send the sewage should the problem arise again.

Contacted several times this week by The Tico Times, hotel officials have declined to comment.

A half-hour drive from the hotel, an apparently unrelated incident was unfolding.

In the village of El Gallo, hidden among dusty dirt lanes, scrub brush and graced with sprawling vistas of Rincón de la Vieja volcano, a bad odor was wafting down from a defunct sewage treatment plant that officials say is operating illegally.

Trucks, which residents reported were sometimes decrepit and concealing their license plates, rattled in at a rate of up to 150 per day, some, they said, in the middle of the night.

"No one could sleep," said community leader Alexandra Sibaja. "It was just unbelievable."

The smell was so offensive, students reported their eyes were watering in class.

Local residents took notice and organized.

Every time a truck passed, they wrote down the time, a short description, and its license plate number, compiling a list of hundreds over four days.

The residents said they observed trucks

spilling sewage onto the street.

Truck drivers, the residents said, responded by obscuring license plates behind rags, stripping them all together, or simply going so fast, kicking up so much dirt, that no one could read them.

Shortly thereafter, community members who had verified that the plant was operating illegally, and that a new one next door had permits for just one truck a day, not 150, decided to act.

On Wednesday, the town blockaded the street, preventing the trucks from making their daily delivery.

The municipality supported their efforts, said Sibaja.

"The mayor has finally promised us he will shut down the plants. Thank God," she said.

Municipal environmental inspector Augusto Otarola summarized the situation in a report to the municipality on Dec. 7.

"We have proved the repeated entry and exit of cistern trucks carrying sewage from the hotel to the 'treatment plants' in Gallo," he wrote.

The discovery came eight months after the hotel had assured MINAE the problem had "not only been solved...but will remain definitively eliminated in the future."

Hotel Allegro Papagayo, part of the Spanish hotel chain Occidental and the enormous and controversial Papagayo Tourism Project, is on government land - its concession managed by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT).

ICT, Otarola said, "must ensure that laws in this zone are obeyed. This is a grave offense, and could warrant the cancellation of the concession."

But ICT and other government officials have juggled the blame, Otarola said.

"We see inaction and apathy on the part of our institutions, whether it be the Environment Ministry, the Health Ministry, or the Tourism Institute, among others, who have not assumed their responsibilities and have not taken the required measures in this situation."

The hotel said it hired a private company to take care of the wastewater and that it was not the hotel's responsibility to determine where the excrement was exported, according to Otarola's report.

Gadi Amit, a local activist and long-time leader of the Guanacaste Brotherhood Association, said he is troubled by the incident, which is not unlike the sewage problems that last fall forced the closure of several hotels in Tamarindo to the south.

"Is this the type of tourism this government is promoting? Is this a company that is showing consideration for the surrounding communities? Is this the kind of development we want?"

Over the course of an hour Wednesday morning, The Tico Times observed and photographed three cistern trucks leaving the hotel's premises from the site of the sewage storage facility.

All three trucks displayed license plate numbers matching those recorded by community members in Liberia months earlier.

Local guards, truck drivers and a fierce stench confirmed the out-going truck's contents.

No one knows exactly how many of the trucks that swarm the hotel's sewage holding tanks go to El Gallo, or where else they



Dave Sherwood | Tico Times

**Evidence Piling Up:** Community leader Alexandra Sibaja documents the stream of sewage into El Gallo.

might be headed, because managers there aren't talking.

Hotel guests interviewed by The Tico Times on Playa Manzanillo, the public beach that abuts the hotel, were more vocal.

"We'd been smelling the sewage from the trucks all week. We had wondered where they'd been taking it," said Glenna Barnes, a Canadian who had spent the week at Hotel Allegro Papagayo. "We're never coming back." ■

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