

Reshaping Futures and Building Resilient Communities in Costa Rica



Did you know that every Southwest airplane receives a full aircraft overhaul every four years? Ever wonder where all that aircraft seat leather goes?

Each year, Southwest donates thousands of pounds of leather to provide employment, skills training, and other social benefits for organizations and communities around the world, including the charming Turrialba, Costa Rica.

A beautiful partnership in the heart of Turrialba has taken off on the

campus of The Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center ([CATIE](#)) and in Mollejones, a picturesque, close-knit community in the mountains of Costa Rica.

CATIE is a regional center dedicated to research and graduate education in agriculture and the management, conservation, and sustainable use of natural resources. Its work in the outreach space supporting the economic, social, and environmental development of rural communities aligns beautifully with Southwest's focus on being a good global citizen, making this partnership a perfect match for Southwest's award-winning [Repurpose with Purpose](#) program, a global sustainability initiative that partners with organizations to upcycle thousands of pounds of aircraft seat leather into new products each year, keeping it out of landfills.

Southwest first connected with CATIE three years ago to begin discussions around expanding its Repurpose with Purpose Program internationally by donating aircraft seat leather and capacity-building grants to the organization. The goal of this impactful program is to build resilient communities by creating employment opportunities for women and men in rural Costa Rica utilizing donated material.

Fast forward to 2023, CATIE and Southwest celebrated the inauguration of the expanded and repurposed space on campus that is now home to CATIE's Repurpose with Purpose Program. This space that was once an unused gym is now a welcoming and vibrant workshop serving as the hub for women and men participating in skill-building leather workshops and entrepreneurial training. Equipped with industrial machines, tools, and of course, leather, the community-building space provides a place where camaraderie and friendships have also taken flight!

The first cohort—including some who travel more than an hour each way to participate in the program—completed the program and graduated with new skills and a vision to create their own businesses. For many, this was their first certification of any kind. With thousands of community members cheering them on, 26 program participants beamed with joy as they walked across the stage to receive their certificate during CATIE's International Feria. As they say, in Costa Rica, it was a Pura Vida moment!

During the Feria, the program artisans welcomed everyone to the Repurpose with Purpose tent, where they shared their experiences participating in the program, showcased and sold their handcrafted products, and even recruited people to join the next cohort, which now includes 30

people participating in the training program. This fall, six program graduates will submit a business plan with the opportunity to receive an entrepreneurial grant to support their idea.

It all starts with material!

Southwest donated thousands of pounds of aircraft seat leather to CATIE to support this program. The material lands on campus directly after coming off planes during scheduled aircraft overhauls. An important first step is the work needed to prepare the material for upcycling—deconstruction and cleaning—before it touches down in the workshop where it will then takeoff as a new product that is handcrafted with LUV by program participants.













CATIE partnered with Mollejones—a small, rural community with minimal access to resources and work—to employ community members to do this critical first step to prepare the material. CATIE has been providing outreach to the Mollejones community for many years and knew they would be the perfect partner for this workforce development opportunity. The Mollejones Community Association employed 16 community members on 618 Días de Cuero—leather days—to unstitch, clean, sort, and package and deliver 1,674 seats to CATIE.

With stunning views of the rain forest, Mollejones is also home to a community of people with huge hearts who work together to find opportunities to generate economic impact for their families and community. It's a beautiful collaboration of neighbors taking care of neighbors.





Mother and son, Laura and David Vargas, are both very engaged in the leather project. David, currently in high school, has worked as part of the leather deconstruction team and helps his mom with her leather products business, both selling at local ferias as well as her home business. Laura hosts tourists in her home, teaching the art of breadmaking from her wood-fired tin oven, and then invites them to visit her leather product shop. With the additional income earned from the sale of leather products, the Vargas family was able to purchase a new balcony overlooking the mountains of Turrialba, a peaceful spot where they enjoy coffee together and host tourists. Laura's next goal is to purchase an industrial sewing machine to help her leather products business further.

At Southwest, our Heart is to connect people and champion communities like the beautiful community of Turrialba. This partnership with CATIE connects new opportunities to people, champions communities, and supports advancing our environmental sustainability efforts.

We look forward to expanding our partnership with CATIE to empower more women and men in Costa Rica to start new businesses and develop new skills for employment opportunities!