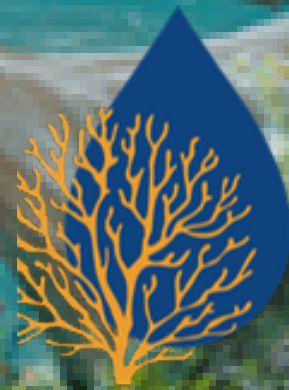


# The Panama Project

Born in the Pandemic, Driven by Rotarians:  
The Panama Project—Service Above Self in  
Action.”



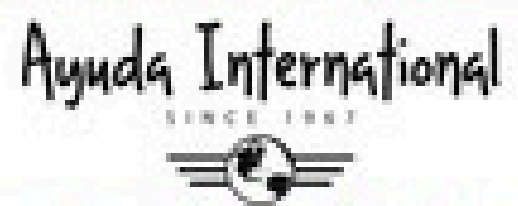
Original Artwork  
Bocas del Toro Artist Julie Jorgensen



**Rotary  
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PROJECT  
RotaryReefs.org



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From Isolation to Global Impact :

# The Panama Project

How one Rotarian turned a pandemic lockdown into a blueprint for global change.

Environmental  
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## A Mission Interrupted



In early 2020, as the world braced for the COVID-19 pandemic, Steve Bender — President of the Rotary Club of Newport Beach — was in Panama preparing for another global outreach mission.

Bender, the CEO of Ayuda International, leads a team of volunteer dentists and dental students from the University of Southern California (USC). Each year Ayuda provides more than a million dollars' worth of free dental services to underserved communities in Southern California and abroad.

As was his custom, Steve flew out two days ahead of his advance setup team to prepare equipment and supplies and coordinate local logistics. But this time, everything changed overnight.

When Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) abruptly shut down due to global travel restrictions, Steve's team was stranded in California — and Steve himself was stranded on Isla Colón, a small Island in the Bocas del Toro archipelago off Panama's Caribbean coast.

Cut off from his team, from air travel, and from the rhythm of his humanitarian work, Bender faced an unthinkable pause. But what might have been a period of helpless isolation soon transformed into something far more powerful: a seed of innovation and community impact that grew far beyond the islands.

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## A Crisis Becomes an Opportunity

With borders closed and supplies dwindling, the isolation of the outer islands of Bocas del Toro became painfully clear. Seniors, Indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé families, and small fishing communities suddenly found themselves without reliable access to food, fuel, or medical supplies.

Refusing to stand by, Bender drew on his Rotary training and logistical experience to organize a grassroots emergency supply/delivery network. Using small boats, he began transporting essentials to the most vulnerable — medicines for the elderly, staple foods for families, fuel for indigenous communities.

Within weeks, his ad hoc effort had evolved into a coordinated lifeline connecting remote communities. Out of a global crisis, a new kind of service was born.

*“Rotary teaches us through its motto, ‘Service Above Self,’ that true leadership begins with helping others”*

*Steve Bender*

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Original Artwork

Bocas del Toro Artist Julie Jorgensen

## Diving Deep for Conservation



Between his supply-runs, Bender (A PADI Master Diver) returned to his first love — the sea. What he found beneath the surface alarmed him: coral bleaching, shrinking fish populations, and the rapid spread of invasive lionfish threatening the ecosystem.

With the same determination that fueled his humanitarian missions, he founded a local-global partnership: the Rotary Reef Program. Together with local organizations, divers, scientists, and local fishermen, the team built artificial reef structures, created a coral seed-bank, and developed a lionfish initiative — training fishermen to harvest the invasive species for restaurants, generating income while protecting native species.

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# The Panama Project

On his supply rounds, Bender noticed a simple contradiction: imported pineapples arriving from Panama's mainland — even as perfectly good local fruit rotted unpicked nearby.

From that observation emerged **Bocas Bounty**, a community exchange program encouraging residents to share and trade what they grew — fruits, vegetables, seeds, seedlings, and even fish. What began as a food-security effort during the pandemic blossomed into a movement for local resilience, uniting Indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, and expatriate communities.



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## Feeding and Empowering a Community

*“Rotary’s Four-Way Test reminds us to ask whether our actions are beneficial to all concerned. Sharing food became the simplest, most powerful way to live out that service—meeting real needs, building connection, and helping our community endure the challenges of the pandemic.”*

As the network grew, Steve began taking fruit tree orders from friends on the outer islands, coordinating truck- and boatloads of saplings from the mainland. He distributed and helped plant them across the archipelago, turning backyards and community plots into thriving food gardens — boosting local production of fruits and vegetables and deepening the islands’ self-reliance.



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## Reforestation for Future Generations

A visit to a Green Macaw Rescue Centre in Costa Rica introduced Bender to another crisis — the disappearance of the Great Green Macaw from Panama due to deforestation of its nesting tree, the mountain almond (almendro). (Also called The Tree of Life as it supports 1000's of species)

Partnering with local conservationists and the Panamanian government, he launched a mass reforestation initiative. In its first year, more than 5,000 almendro saplings were planted across the islands — with the hope of seeing fruiting trees by 2028 and the macaws soaring over Bocas once again by 2030.

*"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago.  
The second-best time is now."*



From Isolation to Global Impact :

# The Panama Project



## The Panama Project: From Local Roots to Global Reach

What began as isolated efforts to meet immediate needs has now evolved into The Panama Project — the flagship of the 7 Seas Initiative and a recognized model for integrated, community-driven sustainability.

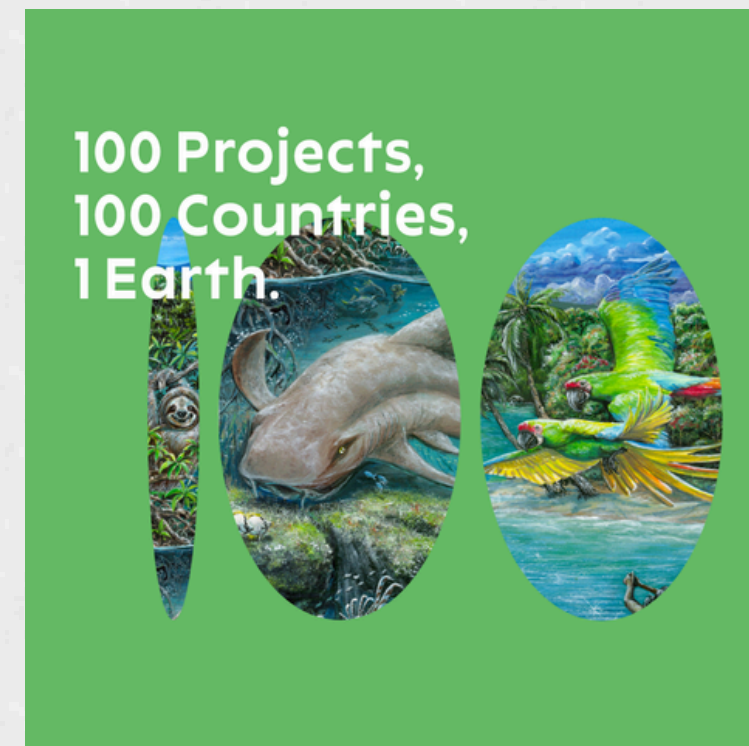
Described as a “living laboratory” in Bocas del Toro, The Panama Project weaves together environmental restoration, cultural preservation, health services, and social empowerment under one cohesive framework: the 4-7-8-17 Model — blending Rotary’s Four-Way Test, Seven Areas of Focus, Eight Pillars of Positive Peace, and the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



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# The Panama Project

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Originally inspired by the April 2019 edition of Rotary Magazine, Steve learned about **Project Drawdown**, which he immediately turned to as his go-to resource for evidence-based climate solutions.

As RI President Barry Rassin warns, “Eighty percent of the land in the Bahamas is less than 5 feet above sea level... My country is going to be gone if we do nothing.” That sense of urgency — the understanding that climate change is not abstract but personal, immediate, and unequal in its impacts — resonated deeply. Drawdown’s science-driven roadmap offered not only clarity but also hope: a practical menu of actions that communities could take to protect ecosystems, strengthen resilience, and restore balance. Its emphasis on regeneration, coastal protection, and community empowerment helped shape the strategic backbone of The Panama Project, ensuring that every intervention aligned with proven pathways to a more sustainable and equitable future.

By 2025 the project’s reach had expanded globally, through the creation of an AI-powered platform to help Rotary clubs worldwide measure, strengthen, and scale their impact. The goal — “**100 Projects in 100 Countries**” — is now underway, translating Bender’s island experience into a worldwide ripple of service and innovation.

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## The Role of the Oral Hygiene Initiative

The Oral Hygiene Initiative played a key role in the health-care component of The Panama Project. During their first restorative dental clinic in Panama, they discovered a troubling fact: the children in Bocas del Toro had more dental problems than children served in orphanages in Mexico, Thailand, Cambodia and India. The difference? These children had the means to buy soda and candy at lunchtime — yet lacked the preventive education to offset it.

The initiative quickly pivoted to deliver educational programs, adopt entire communities, and distribute 1,000 bamboo toothbrushes and fluoride treatments through volunteer missions, blending health, education, and Volunteer Tourism.



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# The Panama Project

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## What's Next



Tropical Arts\_Bocas del Toro, Panama

Our next major goal in Bocas del Toro is to begin the design, funding and construction of a small clinic and storage facility that will serve as a central hub for our equipment and ongoing mission work. Transporting equipment from the United States to Bocas remains one of the most challenging and costly aspects of our efforts. By 2027, we aim to have a dedicated storage facility that can also function as a sterilization space—and, in emergencies, as a one-patient operatory staffed by a small team of volunteers.

In August 2026, we will return to host a large dental clinic and senior eyeglass distribution event. During that mission, we will also conduct site evaluations to identify the ideal location for this new building, a step that represents significant progress in creating sustainable long-term care for local communities.

None of this would be possible without the extraordinary generosity and partnership of the Rotarian owners and staff of Tropical Arts on Isla Careneros. Their support—ranging from complimentary boat and equipment storage to the use of their remarkable over-the-water facilities and lodging, to countless favors and acts of kindness—has been invaluable to our work. Their commitment has elevated every aspect of our missions

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## What's Next

At the heart of this support are two individuals whose leadership and dedication have been truly transformative: Erik Veenstra and Karen Ealy of the **Rotary Club of Bocas del Toro** .

Their tireless advocacy, strategic guidance, and hands-on involvement have created the foundation upon which so much of our progress has been built. Whether coordinating resources, opening doors, offering insight, or simply stepping in wherever help is needed, Erik and Karen have been steadfast champions of our mission.

Their impact reaches far beyond logistics. They have provided the encouragement, stability, and local partnership necessary to make these large-scale projects not only possible, but successful. The ongoing progress in Bocas del Toro—and the hope it brings to so many—is a testament to their commitment.

Quite simply, we could not have accomplished what we have without Erik and Karen's support. Their contributions exemplify the true spirit of Rotary service, and their generosity continues to shape the future of our work in the region.

<https://tropicalartsbocas.com/>



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## Why It Matters

The Panama Project is more than a pandemic-success story. It's a living testament to adaptability, collaboration and purpose — a vivid reminder that one person's skills and vision, when aligned with community needs, can reshape entire systems.

It shows that Rotary's strength lies not just in service above self, but in service that multiplies — across sectors, islands, and the globe.

From coral reefs to classrooms, from the rainforest canopy to the dental chair, Steve Bender's journey proves that isolation can be the birthplace of innovation — and that true impact begins with asking, "How can we help?"

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## What's Next for The Panama Project

The Panama Project's next chapter is about strengthening what already works — and building what the community needs most. A small medical and dental center, volunteer cabanas, and a water ambulance will improve daily life on the islands, while new environmental efforts — from an aviary for the Great Green Macaw to expanded reef and forest restoration to prepare the region for long-term resilience.

This phase also brings in new collaborators. ArchiMAT will guide communities on how to select or create low-carbon, locally made materials, helping villages build sustainably without losing cultural identity. Together with creative partners, the project will launch pilot builds in areas that need them most — small structures that prove what responsible design can achieve with limited resources.

Grounded in climate science from Drawdown and the Rotarian spirit of service, the Panama Project continues to evolve from an isolated effort into a model of practical, community led change.

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## Expanding the Horizon : Newport Home × ArchiMAT

As the vision widened beyond reefs and forests, it became clear that sustainable living also depends on what we build — and how we build it. This outlook sparked a natural collaboration between Steve Bender’s Newport Home and Ophelia Jen, founder of ArchiMAT, a platform enabling architects, builders, innovators, and consultants to source verified low-carbon materials and track the carbon footprint of every design decision.

Together, they will curate The Sustainable Living Xperience — Sustainable Building & Product Showcase at Environmental Xperience at EarthX. The exhibition will highlight atmospheric water systems, upcycled building materials, black-water treatment solutions, solar integration, and regenerative housing concepts — all aimed at helping the design and construction industry create low-carbon spaces without compromising quality or creativity.

The partnership reflects the DNA of the Panama Project itself: grounded, design-driven, and driven by the belief that when the right ideas and the right people meet, sustainable solutions become not just possible — but inevitable.

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## A Catamaran for Change

**The Phoenix Project** is a purpose-built humanitarian catamaran designed to deliver healthcare, clean water, and essential services to coastal and riverine communities that are difficult to reach by road or traditional infrastructure.

Building on the “Doc in a Box” concept developed by Steve more than a decade ago, the Phoenix integrates modular clinics and workspaces constructed from standard shipping containers and car-hauling trailers. This proven approach has already supported initiatives such as an AIDS clinic in Africa and a mobile dental unit capable of transforming into a 15-chair clinic in under an hour.

The Phoenix brings this adaptable model to the water by creating a multipurpose vessel that can be rapidly reconfigured to meet a wide range of local needs.

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# The Panama Project

## Mission Capabilities

The Phoenix is designed as a flexible platform capable of supporting diverse missions, including:

### Community Development Logistics

Delivering materials and modular components to help construct or support community centers, schools, small clinics, and other local infrastructure.

### Medical and Dental Care

Hosting modular clinics on board or ashore for primary care, minor surgeries, eye care, and dental treatment using containerized “Doc in a Box” units.

### Clean Water and Sanitation

Producing and delivering desalinated water to indigenous and remote communities during dry seasons, while supporting hygiene and sanitation programs.

### Emergency and Humanitarian Aid

Transporting medical teams, supplies, food, and shelter materials to communities affected by disasters or seasonal isolation.

### Environmental and Circular-Economy Projects

Collecting recyclables and other recoverable materials, transporting them to regional processing hubs, and returning with goods and tools that sustain local livelihoods.

### Marine Restoration and Research

- Serving as a coral spawning platform that can be relocated to reef restoration sites across the Caribbean.
- Supporting 3D coral reef printing initiatives.
- Facilitating seagrass planting and other habitat-restoration projects.

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# The Panama Project

The Phoenix embodies a forward-looking approach built on five key principles:

## ● **Modular**

Based on container and trailer units that can be swapped, upgraded, or repurposed as needs evolve.

## ● **Rapidly Deployable**

Capable of arriving fully equipped and operational within minutes rather than days.

## ● **Community-Focused**

Designed to collaborate with local leaders, health workers, and volunteers, leaving behind improved skills, infrastructure, and capacity.

## ● **Multi-Role**

A single vessel adaptable for medical missions, water delivery, logistics, or environmental operations without major reconfiguration.

## ● **Shallow-Water Compatible**

A multi-hull design optimized for Caribbean and other shallow-water environments.

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# The Panama Project

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**Thank you.**

As the Grateful Dead famously said, “What a long, strange trip it’s been.” This journey would not have been possible without the support of so many people. While I can’t name everyone, I want to recognize a few who truly went above and beyond.

“ Brian Wilcox of The Dolphin Bay Hideaway, my closest friend there, supported me week after week during my deliveries to the outer islands, offering spare fuel and shelter through countless storms. Brian has also overseen all the tree plantings—not only the Almendro, but the monthly plantings carried out through the Bocas Rainforest Reforestation Initiative (BRRRI) in collaboration with the Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation (ITEC).”

“ My deepest gratitude also goes to Dr. Peter N. Lahanas and Leonor Caballos Meraz of ITEC, whose guidance, partnership, and ecological expertise have strengthened every aspect of our reforestation efforts. We are equally thankful for the continued support of MiAmbiente under the leadership of Lucrecia Miller and her dedicated team, who join us month after month for our ongoing plantings. Jana Koebel of Seas and Straws and One Earth One Ocean was always there with practical advice on plastics and recycling—and to help steer the ship.”

“ Gary from Green Acres has generously donated many of the Almendro saplings that have made this project possible. Joan and Steve from The Cosmic Crab inspired the creation of the lionfish initiative through their unwavering support of local fishermen and their commitment to keeping lionfish on the menu. Heylis Martinez, our official translator and a wonderful volunteer, also serenades us with her amazing opera voice.”

From Isolation to Global Impact :

# The Panama Project



“The Rotary Club of Bocas del Toro—along with the outstanding Emily Talentino, Kurt Betzel, and Sam Horn (who also serves as director of Floating Doctors, an extraordinary organization serving indigenous communities)—has been a steadfast partner throughout this work. We are also deeply grateful to Doug Marcy of Caribbean Coral Reef, our strategic partner on the Rotary Reef Project in Panama. Special thanks go to Nico from The Bocas Breeze, whose support and community engagement have helped amplify these efforts. And finally, heartfelt thanks to the team at the Ultimate Refugio, who never let us down and always feed and entertain the Rotary volunteers we bring.”

“A very special thanks and tribute go to what I call the “Panama Dream Team”—Juan Carlos Navarro, Minister of the Environment of Panama, and Juan Carlos Monterrey Gómez, Special Representative for Climate Change of Panama’s Ministry of the Environment. Their shared passion, deep expertise, and unwavering commitment to protecting our planet make them exceptional leaders at a time when the world needs them most. I’m truly excited to continue working together and to build on our shared commitment to advancing meaningful environmental and climate action.”

“ Thank you to Rotarian John Mathers for championing youth voices as an important part of climate action. Thank you to our Rotary Club members Elizabeth Doty and Don Bender whose support helped create 4-7-8-17, and to Rotaract President Zachary Weaver for creating the 4-7-8-17 AI Navigator.”

**Thank you.**

From Isolation to Global Impact :

# The Panama Project

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## Thank You Everyone



Rotary Club of Newport Beach,  
Don and Steve Bender, Dr. Rita Garabet with Mike  
Peers of The Rotary Club of Coronado, Panama.

Rotary District 5320 Dentist and  
Volunteers in Coronado, Panama

Rotary Club of Newport Beach,  
Dr. Kiyomi Yamizaki, Dr. Jennifer Stone, President Steve Bender, Dr Haleh  
Shaheedy and Ayuda Co-Founder, Dr. Harris Done from RC of Anaheim

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## Thank You Everyone



Rotary club of Newport Beach's, Dream Team:  
Dr Kiyomi Yamazaki, Dr Travis Hunt, Ashely Affholter, B.S. RDH. and Dr Jennifer Stone at the amazing air conditioned clinic location at Tropical Arts in Bocas Del Toro, Panama

Rotary Club of Newport Beach,  
President, Steve Bender with Dr. Kaity Zech, President  
Rotaract Club of Newport Beach

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# The Panama Project



## Integrating The Rotary Club of Newport Beach's 4-7-8-17 Framework and AI Navigator

Beginning in 2012, we set out to develop a way to evaluate and strengthen Rotary Club projects. After several iterations—including updates to pledges and awards—we introduced, in 2018, a framework requiring all club projects to align with Rotary's Four-Way Test, the Six Areas of Focus, and the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

### Service 4-7-8-17 Program

OUR CLUB IS FOCUSED ON:

OUR CLUB IS FOCUSED ON:	<b>4</b> WAY TEST OF THE THINGS WE THINK SAY-DO	IS IT THE TRUTH? <b>1</b>	IS IT FAIR TO ALL CONCERNED? <b>2</b>	WILL IT BUILD GOODWILL & BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? <b>3</b>	WILL IT BE BENEFICIAL TO ALL CONCERNED? <b>4</b>												
	<b>7</b> AREAS OF FOCUS	SAVING MOTHERS AND CHILDREN	SUPPORTING EDUCATION	GROWING LOCAL ECONOMIES	FIGHTING DISEASE				SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT	PROVIDING CLEAN WATER, SANITATION & HYGIENE	PROMOTING PEACE						
	<b>8</b> PILLARS OF POSITIVE PEACE	WELL FUNCTIONING GOVERNMENT	EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES	FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION	GOOD RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS				HIGH LEVELS OF HUMAN CAPITAL	ACCEPTANCE OF THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS	LOW LEVELS OF CORRUPTION	SOUND BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT					
	<b>17</b> SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS	1 NO POVERTY	2 ZERO HUNGER	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	4 QUALITY EDUCATION				5 GENDER EQUALITY	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	13 CLIMATE ACTION

Since then, Rotary has added the environment as the seventh Area of Focus, and we incorporated the Eight Pillars of Positive Peace. Together, these elements evolved into what is now known as the 4-7-8-17 Program.

In 2025, our Rotaract President created the 4-7-8-17 AI Navigator (<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-TBogolILy-4-7-8-17-ai-navigator>), an AI-powered tool that helps users assess and align their projects with this framework for ethics, peace-building, and sustainable development.

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## Here's how the 4-7-8-17 Framework works

### 4-Way Test

Rotary's timeless guide to ethical decision-making:

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

### 7 Areas of Rotary Focus

Ensure your project aligns with one or more of Rotary's seven focus areas such as water & sanitation, disease prevention, peacebuilding, and environmental sustainability.

### 8 Pillars of Positive Peace

Draw from the Institute for Economics & Peace framework to create long-term impact by addressing systemic factors that sustain peace, such as equitable resource distribution, well-functioning governance, and access to information.

### 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Connect your project to the global sustainability agenda, ensuring alignment with goals like Climate Action, Life Below Water, Life on Land, Quality Education, and more.

The Navigator not only evaluates projects—it also helps users strengthen and refine them. Improved projects can then be selected for our 100 Projects in 100 Countries initiative, which we are delivering in partnership with CNN, showcasing impactful, high-quality service work from around the world.

By connecting Rotary's 1.2 million members with evidence-based sustainability solutions—such as those highlighted by Project Drawdown—the 4-7-8-17 AI Navigator makes global impact achievable at the local level, empowering Rotarians and community leaders to advance effective climate action, peacebuilding, and sustainable development.

From Isolation to Global Impact :

# The Panama Project

Because the future isn't  
something we wait for – it's  
something we build, together.

Integrating The Rotary Club of Newport Beach's 4-7-8-17  
Framework and AI Navigator

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Please join us at the **Rotary Xperience**, the **largest Rotary Environmental and Sustainability Conference in the world**, held during the **Environmental Xperience At EarthX - April 19–22, 2026 at the Hilton Anatole in Dallas, Texas.**

This global gathering will bring together Rotarians from around the world and showcase environmental and sustainability projects from **over 100 countries**. We will unite scientists, business innovators, volunteers, and students under one roof to highlight impactful solutions, host hands-on workshops, and build the cross-sector partnerships needed to drive true systemic change.