We, Loes Roos and Kees Groenendijk, the owners of Hotel Heliconia, are from the Netherlands and we both studied biology at Wageningen University. After our studies we spend 14 years in Southern Africa, working with local communities to improve living conditions in rural areas of Zimbabwe, Southern Mozambique and Southern Angola. Here we realised that eco-tourism can provide a boost to the local economy and to local people’s wellbeing.

In 2006 we moved to Panama to start an ECO-tourism company. For us ECO stands for Ecology and Community Oriented Tourism. We choose Mariato because it is close to major attractions (Coiba NP, Cerro Hoya NP) and local people were already involved in turtle conservation. Our objective was (and is) to provide a “wow-experience” by providing in-depth information so guests can put their experience in context of the ecology and a high quality of service in a personalized/familar setting.

We requested a local arquitect for a lodge design with local elements and a low environmental footprint. We reforested 8 hectares of pasture, started in 2006 before building, to develop beautiful green surroundings to our ecolodge. So we built a forest around our ecolodge, rather than building an ecolodge in a forest.

The lodge was opened in 2010. Many of our guests enjoy walking in our reforestation project and visit and support the community initiatives to protect sea turtle nesting beaches. We have trained members of local communities and provided small business loans to enable them to provide high quality tourism products to our guests. We have focused on the local people being empowered, and being partners to us, so that they can grow with us.

We are now further developing some of our tours, looking into lowering our footprint and deepening the nature experience.

We keep working with local communities to offer a range of high quality experiences to tourists that are ecologically, economically and socially sustainable.