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# Bill to Protect Sierra Caral Remains Stalled in Congress

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By Louisa Reynolds

Atlantic coast, is the most biodiverse forest remnant in Caribbean Guatemala. Part of the Merendón mountain range that stretches from Guatemala to Honduras, Sierra Caral is a 26 km long and 9.5 km wide strip of forest land that is home to a vast array of critically endangered species.

Sierra Caral's 35,000 hectares of broadleaved evergreen forest are home to 22% of Guatemala's amphibians. Because of their endemism, 12 of these amphibians have been classified as "threatened with extinction" on the World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Species, five of them listed as "critically endangered."

This forest is also an important part of the biotic corridor through the Central American isthmus, where a number of notable mammals can be found, such as the endangered black howler monkey (*Alouatta pigra*) and the Central American spider monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi*).

Added to this, the Sierra Caral forest contains the Bobos, Las Ánimas, Negro, Chiquito, Frío, Plátanos, and Nuevo Cacao river basins, feeder rivers that converge in the Río Motagua basin and which constitute a crucial water supply for local communities.

Although the Universidad del Valle's department of investigations has stated that the conservation of Sierra Caral ought to be a national priority, the area is suffering from severe deforestation. The Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (CONAP) says that, between 2001 and 2010, a total of 4,230 ha of forest lands were lost, mainly from land invasions by campesinos who have logged forest land to grow corn, even though this land is unsuitable for the crop and has a steep slope with a gradient of more than 45%. This means that Sierra Caral could disappear completely in 48 years.

Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandón, director of the Fundación Para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO), a Guatemalan environmental nongovernmental organization (NGO) that is seeking to halt the destruction of Sierra Caral, explains that "campesinos are invading Sierra Caral and are making their way up the mountains because they have been forcibly evicted by narco-ranchers in the Motagua Valley."

Carlos Velásquez, a specialist in reptiles and amphibians from the University of San Carlos' school of biology, says it is difficult to establish how long it could take to regenerate Sierra Caral. "It's not easy to work that out. The good thing is that Sierra Caral is one of the forests in Guatemala with the highest rates of forest regrowth and that opens up the possibility of saving it."

"When Central America was hit by Hurricane Mitch [in 1998], Honduras suffered huge devastation, whereas in Guatemala, Sierra Caral acted as a natural barrier and much of the rainwater was gradually absorbed by the forest. Sierra Caral acted as a buffer zone. However, uncontrolled timber logging means that rainwater won't be as easily absorbed, rain patterns will change, and temperatures will rise, which means that cold-climate species, such as amphibians, will disappear", adds Velásquez.

### ***Saving Sierra Caral***

Sierra Caral is currently listed by CONAP as a "Special Protection Area" under a law regulating the protection of areas of biological and hydrological importance that was approved by Congress in 1989. However, the protected-areas law (Ley de Áreas Protegidas) recognizes the conservation of areas such as Sierra Caral as important but does not impose sanctions against agents responsible for their destruction, nor does it assign a specific budget for their protection.

In a bid to save Sierra Caral, in 2011, CONAP put forward Bill 4025, which seeks to protect the forest by dividing it into three areas: 1) A nucleus zone, comprising three separate areas with a total extension of 4,676.04 ha, where the main river basins are. Scientific investigation would be the only human activity allowed, and timber logging and crop growing would be strictly forbidden. 2) An 8,930.85 ha multiple-use zone surrounding the three-part nucleus zone, where conservation activities such as reforestation would be combined with sustainable hydroelectric, farming, and cattle-ranching projects (only on lands suitable for such purposes). 3) A 5,406.55 ha buffer zone, surrounding the multiple-use zone, where environmentally sustainable activities that will provide communities with a source of income will be allowed. This will be the area to which most human settlements will be confined.

Open-pit mining would be strictly forbidden in the three areas. The bill also states that the national land fund (Fontierras) must give land titles to the campesinos already living in Sierra Caral (only in areas suitable for this, such as the buffer zone and certain parts of the multiple-use zone) to avoid agrarian disputes, as this has historically been a common problem in the department of Izabal and in many parts of Guatemala.

Fernando Castro, CONAP's director of conservation units, says 22 communities are living in Sierra Caral (mostly ladinos—nonindigenous—and Chortí Mayans). CONAP and FUNDAECO have stressed that they do not seek to evict campesinos but to regulate land use, protect the forest, and encourage sustainable development. Local communities have supported the bill, and in 2011 they sent representatives to Congress to lobby in favor of its approval.

Castro says that a 6 million quetzal (US\$766,871) budget would be needed to launch the bill during the first five years; after that period, the bill states that the government must assign 1.5 million quetzales (US\$191,717) a year for the protection of Sierra Caral. One of the top resource priorities will be hiring 16 forest wardens to safeguard the area.

However, Castro explains that the bill was put forward in 2011 as part of a "green package," a series of environmental bills that seek to protect other endangered areas. The idea was to push forward these bills, which had the support of a number of environmentally friendly members of Congress, before the general elections in September 2011.

But the members of Congress who supported the green package were unable to secure enough support for these initiatives, and they remained stalled in Congress. Then the elections came, a new Congress took over in January 2012, and no members of the lower house have shown an interest in these issues.

Given this scenario, Castro is pessimistic about the chances of getting the bill to move forward. "No government has ever made the conservation of protected areas a priority. Without support in Congress, it will be very difficult to secure its approval," he says.

Cerezo adds that in the short term it is unlikely that the bill will be approved. Well aware that time is running out to save Sierra Caral, in 2011, FUNDAECO purchased 225 ha of land in the area that would become the nucleus zone of Sierra Caral, if the bill were approved, with the support of a number of international environmental organizations. The idea, explains Cerezo, is to purchase Sierra Caral's nucleus zone bit by bit and create a nature reserve where campesino communities will be involved as ecotourism guides, artisans, and forest wardens.