

1-15-1998

Deforestation Threatening Costa Rican Wilderness

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Guest Author. "Deforestation Threatening Costa Rican Wilderness." (1998). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8363>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Deforestation Threatening Costa Rican Wilderness

by Guest

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 1998-01-15

[The author is a correspondent for National Public Radio who is currently covering sustainable development issues in Central America and Mexico as part of a project supported by the Ford Foundation. The following article, reprinted by permission, is the second of a two-part review of deforestation and environmental deterioration in Costa Rica's national parks. Part I appeared in the Jan. 8, 1998, edition of NotiCen.]

Puerto Jimenez, Costa Rica. In the 12 years he has been crisscrossing the Osa Peninsula as an air-taxi pilot and environmentalist, Alvaro Ramirez has noticed a dramatic change in the densely forested hills below. "Look!" he says, pointing to a brown stream bisecting the velvet green landscape. "This is one of the tributaries to the Rio Tigre. This road is where the tractor goes up to cut wood. See it? It's a new road. Look there, where they take out the wood. They're not supposed to cut there, it is too close to the river." Through the windshield of his Cessna, we can see ahead of us the sumptuous forest canopy of Corcovado National Park, which is still protected from timber cutting.

But directly below, loggers have been looting the forest reserve surrounding the park, which provides critical additional habitat. The hilltops are checkered with clear-cuts that look like soccer fields; from them lead logging roads and "trails," as Ramirez calls them. We turn around and head for the airstrip in the trading center of Puerto Jimenez. Ramirez stares ahead, a look of resignation on his face. "They are clear-cutting the watersheds," he says. The Osa Peninsula is one of the largest expanses of lowland tropical forest left in Central America. Jutting off the Pacific Coast just above Panama, the Osa is Costa Rica's poorest, most remote and in biological terms its wildest province. Down here, jaguars still come out on the beach to hunt. Scarlet macaws and toucans are as common as sparrows. It is home to the world's largest pit viper, the bushmaster an eight-foot monster they call "matabuey," ox killer in Spanish.

And on the Osa, the forest canopy rises taller than anywhere else in Costa Rica owing to the abundant rainfall. Consumers certainly benefit from the giant hardwoods waiting their turn at the sawmill. In the hands of artisans, they become doors, credenzas, banisters, and floorboards. But environmentalists on the Osa rarely see the end product. They see what is left behind. "We are standing right here by the banks of this river right now looking at the erosion, this water is chocolate brown," says a Greenpeace activist named Joel Stewart, who lives on the Osa when he is not at sea working as captain of the organization's ship, the Rainbow Warrior. He is looking at a muddy torrent that drains an upland region that has been heavily logged recently.

"One thing that bothers me a lot is the last coral reef in the Golfo Dulce region," says Stewart, referring to the body of water that separates the Osa Peninsula from the mainland. "It is dying because of the sedimentation. You go out and dive on this reef and it is covered with silt, which is choking it to death. Other reefs around the gulf have already died because of sedimentation." Stewart says Costa Rica is hypocritical if it continues to promote itself internationally as an

environmental haven, yet it is "only going to preserve what is in the parks as a type of biological zoo and allow everything else to be cut." When the contralto whine of the chain saw starts to echo in the rain forests of Costa Rica, conservationists have learned to fear the worst. Over the past three decades, this country had the foresight to protect large tracts of wilderness by creating a system of nature preserves that comprise 11% of the national territory.

Yet while conservationists were setting aside some forestland, cattle ranchers were mowing it down elsewhere, giving Costa Rica one of the highest rates of deforestation in the Americas. Here, as elsewhere in the region, government policies rewarded landowners for converting forest into what was considered "productive" land namely, cattle ranches.

Today, almost all the virgin forest outside national parks is gone, or going fast. "Even though there are not enough park guards, we can guarantee there is no logging in national parks," says Carlos Herrera, who headed the park service in 1994. "But the rest of the land is simply not protected. It is in danger." A new forestry law passed last year by the Costa Rican parliament includes innovative economic incentives for landowners to preserve these fast-disappearing woodlands.

But another section of the same law reportedly crafted by the timber industry encourages deforestation. "Unfortunately, we have a new forestry law that does not benefit us. On the contrary, it has made the problem worse," says Cecelia Solano of the Association for the Defense of Natural Resources of the Osa. "The new law has been a disgrace for this country, for the forests, and for those of us responsible for conserving for the next generation." Under the old law, landowners had to request timber-cutting permits from federal forestry engineers in San Jose. But the procedure was slow and riddled with corruption. To decentralize the permit process, lawmakers took away the federal authority, and split it between the municipalities and private forestry engineers.

Critics say the result has been chaos: the municipalities are handing out permits, though they have no experience in forest management, and the private foresters, known in Spanish as "regentes," are just as corrupt as the federal foresters were. A former national park guard, who requested his name not be used, has come to a riverbank deep in the Osa, to show what he considers proof of how regentes abuse their authority. "In the Osa, the permits appear to be legal. But they are done under the table," he says. "We are standing within 10 meters of the Rio Tigre, where it is illegal to cut trees, and we can see the stumps of a Guanacaste tree and a Guallabon tree that have been cut. These regentes sell these management plans for sausage (Costa Rican slang for bribes), and they allow the illegal extraction of wood."

The government acknowledges the new forestry law has caused problems. Environmental Minister Rene Castro says his office has filed charges against several private foresters and complained to the national forestry college about others. "We know there are abuses and we have sent the accused regentes to the tribunals," he says, in an interview in his office in San Jose. "But part of the complaints about illegal tree felling is simply ignorance. There will always be trucks carrying logs out of the Osa, because some have permits. There is a mixture of valid and invalid complaints."

While the government defends itself and environmentalists fume, small landowners in the Osa applaud the new rules, which have made it easier for them to cut and sell timber. "There is a lot of

poverty. Old friends I grew up with have left their farms because they couldn't make it, because of conservation," says Freddy Gonzalez, who lives near the community of Rio Nuevo, in the heart of the Osa Peninsula. "We have to sell a little wood to survive. Let me tell you something, mister. The monkeys can eat fruit, but human beings cannot. We have more needs."

The situation has quieted for the moment on the Osa Peninsula. In late August, as public outcry and international attention intensified, Environment Minister Rene Castro imposed a temporary timber-cutting ban in the Osa and created a commission to investigate reports of illegal logging. Environmentalists have cautiously praised the moratorium, although they are worried what will happen when it expires. Meanwhile, concerned residents near other Costa Rican forests being ravaged by loggers have reportedly asked the government to extend the timber ban to their regions as well.

-- End --