

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY
INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

COSTA RICA: COUNTRY PROFILE
JANUARY 1982

Costa Rica is one of four Latin American countries targeted for immediate action by The Nature Conservancy's International Program. This decision was made after a country-by-country, 18-month review of the Hemisphere, on the basis of biological priority (species diversity) and practicality (political/economic factors which influence our expectation for sustained results from conservation investments).

BIOLOGICAL PRIORITY

Costa Rica is a small country which straddles high mountains between the Pacific and Caribbean coasts on the narrow isthmus between North and South America. It is part of the land bridge which connects the biota of two distinct biogeographic regions. The topographic and ecological diversity of Costa Rica is exceptional. It contains all the life zones of Central America, from alpine tundra-like vegetation at 4,000 meters elevation to tropical moist forests on lowland plains on both coasts. It includes plant communities and species typical of both north temperate and neo-tropical realms. Though roughly one-half the size of the state of Virginia, Costa Rica provides habitat for as many plant and animal species as the United States and Canada combined.

Costa Rica has lost an estimated 40% of its native forest lands to agricultural development in the past two decades. Spurred on by demands for cheap beef for the booming fast food business in the U.S., forest land conversion to cattle grazing pasture has been exceptionally rapid. Due to soils degradation, this conversion is often irreversible; it results in the loss of numerous populations of plants and animals, pushing some species inexorably toward extinction.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Costa Rica, the military is conspicuous by its absence. There is no national army, air force or navy. Instead, there has been a tradition of national investments in education, and the literacy rate is 98%. Population growth is the lowest of any Latin American country. Costa Rica is considered the cradle of democracy in Latin America, a country in which there has not been a dictatorship since the first democratic elections at the turn of the century. There continues an avid commitment to a free press and private enterprise.

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

In 1970, President Jose Figueres created the Costa Rican National Park Service. With the further support of two successive presidential administrations, most notably that of Daniel Oduber, and with excellent leadership from the directors of the Park Service, there are now 13 national parks, two national monuments, two wildlife refuges, and five biological reserves which cover over 4% of its land surface. In 1980, these areas were visited by over 300,000 people, mostly Costa Ricans, the equivalent of 15% of the population of the country. The Costa Rican National Park Service is today considered a model in Latin America.

In addition to the National Park Service, there are a number of very fine Costa Rican educational and scientific institutions. The Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) is a consortium of principally U.S. universities with three biological reserves in Costa Rica. The Tropical Science Center is a Costa Rican non-profit organization devoted to scientific research. CATIE (Centro Agronomico Tropical de Investigacion y Ensenanza) is a world-renowned agroforestry research organization serving the Central American region with programs in forestry, agriculture, wildlands, and watershed management. ASCONA (Asociacion Costarricense para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza) is a four-year old, private, activist environmental organization which has been significantly assisted by major AID grants for environmental education. In addition to these organizations, there are excellent Costa Rican universities and a very fine national museum.

The Fundacion de Parques Nacionales (FPN) was created in 1973 as a private, non-profit conservation organization to serve as a catalyst and conduit for gifts of land, money and materials to enhance the efforts of the National Park Service. The Board members of the FPN include both the current and the former director of the National Park Service, as well as other leaders in Costa Rican conservation. The honorary president is former President, Daniel Oduber.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN COSTA RICA

The Nature Conservancy has provided modest assistance to the Costa Rican National Park Service for the establishment of new parks and protected areas since the mid 1970's. The Conservancy - together with World Wildlife Fund and RARE - raised approximately \$150,000 towards the creation and management of the 89,000-acre Corcovado National Park. The Conservancy made a modest contribution for an addition to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, and for the Vargas property addition to La Selva Biological Reserve of the Organization of Tropical Studies.

As a result of the Conservancy's expanding international efforts beginning in the fall of 1980, Costa Rica was selected as one of four principal Latin American countries in which to focus activities. The FPN was selected as a Costa Rican conservation organization with which to work towards a goal of building indigenous land-saving capability in the private sector. A nine-week Conservation Fellowship Program for Jose R. Mora, the Executive Director of the FPN, was completed in December 1981 with funding from a grant from Exxon Corporation. The Fellowship Program included training in the areas of fundraising, identification of conservation priorities, land acquisition techniques, organizational management and administration. It also included visits to The Nature Conservancy by Mario Boza, President of the FPN and former Director of the National Park Service, as well as a visit by Alvaro Ugalde, current Director of the National Park Service and Board member of the Fundacion.

As a continuation of the cooperative effort between the FPN and the Conservancy, one of the Conservancy's most experienced field representatives, Mr Geoffrey S. Barnard, former Director of the Minnesota Field Office, has been sent to Costa Rica to act as in-country advisor to the FPN. Mr. Barnard and his family will live in San Jose during 1982. As a former Peace Corps volunteer in Peru, Stanford Business School graduate, with nine years experience in the field and as Regional Vice President for The Conservancy, Mr. Barnard has excellent qualifications to work with the staff and directors of FPN to help develop long-range plans, programs and the financial support needed for an on-going program. The goal is to develop a model private land conservation organization which will work alongside of government conservation programs, towards protection of the full range of Costa Rica's natural diversity.

As of December 31, 1981, The Conservancy and the FPN had identified contributions to support FPN's 1982 operating budget of \$32,500. This would support salaries and office expenses for a staff of three, including the Executive Director, a Scientist/Fundraiser and Administrative Assistant. The scientist position will be filled 1/2-time by Dr. Luis Diego Gomez, former Director of the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, world expert on ferns and Costa Rican botany. Mr. Barnard's salary and expenses will be included as part of The Nature Conservancy's International Program 1982 operating budget.