

BOLIVIA: NOEL KEMPFER MERCADO NATIONAL PARK

Award-Winning Project Keeps Earth Cooler and Trees Standing



At least 20 waterfalls tumble from the edges of the Huanchaca Plateau in Noel Kempfer Mercado National Park. The sandstone escarpment rises some 1,800 feet above the surrounding plain. © Dennis Fitzpatrick

NAMED FOR A PIONEER of Bolivia's conservation movement, Noel Kempfer Mercado National Park along the Brazilian border of northeastern Bolivia is where the wet Amazon rain forest meets the dry Cerrado grasslands.

Seasonally flooded savannas, gallery and humid forests, thorn scrub, rivers, wetlands, mesas, lagoons and black water bays also cover this area that is roughly the size of Massachusetts. These varied habitats are home to a remarkable number of plants and animals. About one-tenth of the world's estimated 1,000 giant river otters live along the waterways of the park's 3.8 million acres.

Harpy eagles, storks, Amazonian umbrellabirds, helmeted manikins, hoatzins and more than 20 types of parrots are among the 620 bird species. Tapirs, gray and

red-brocket deer, silvery marmosets, pumas, jaguars, maned wolves, giant anteaters, and spider and black howler monkeys are mammals of special interest. Besides otters, river creatures include capybaras, pink river dolphins and black and spectacled caiman.

One striking geological feature of the park is the 2,000-square mile Huanchaca Plateau. This sandstone escarpment rises 1,800 feet above the surrounding plain. Numerous rivers drain the plateau and surrounding escarpments, creating some 20 waterfalls. Arco Iris and Federico Ahlfeld Falls on the Paucerna River are two of the most breathtaking.

This region, purportedly the paradise described in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novel "The Lost World," is under pressure from logging companies and colonizers cutting

forests to make room for ranches and farm fields. These threats have prompted conservationists, local communities, government agencies and corporations to forge a unique partnership to protect a one-of-a-kind natural area.

The Nature Conservancy is collaborating with in-country partners on initiatives at Noel Kempff Mercado such as: participating in the world's largest climate action project; carrying out world-class scientific research; and working with local communities to provide stable incomes without depleting natural resources.

Keeping the Earth Cool

Keeping trees standing in Bolivia not only provides animal habitat, but it also helps regulate the climate around the globe. When cleared or degraded, forests release carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse gases proven to cause climate change. In 1997, the Conservancy, Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza (FAN), the Bolivian government and three energy companies started the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project. The project used \$1.6 million of its \$9.6 million in initial funding to terminate logging rights on 1.6 million acres of government-owned land. With incorporation of that land into the park, Noel Kempff Mercado grew from 2.2 million acres to 3.8 million acres.

The 30-year project seeks to prevent deforestation, thus avoiding or reducing emissions of 4.5 million tons of carbon. So far, American Electric Power, BP and PacifiCorp have invested a combined \$8.25 million in this Bolivian project. The Conservancy has invested \$2.6 million. The project is a world-renowned experiment in setting a value on the "ecosystem service" of standing forests.

In 2003, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government presented the climate project with its inaugural Roy Family Award. The award recognized the project as a model for public-private cooperation in the interest of the environment. Noel Kempff Mercado is one of four sites where Conservancy scientists are monitoring the long-term impacts of climate change on protected areas.

Local Livelihoods

The Noel Kempff Climate Action Project isn't just about trees. About 1,200 people live in five communities in and near the reserve. Improving their quality of life while promoting more ecological use of natural resources is essential to park conservation. Project funds have financed a new school and improved medical care. Small-scale harvests of cashews and hearts-of-palm, and sustainable sales of wood from certified forests are enterprises that discourage wholesale logging and the clearing of land for farming.

For example, the Bolivian communities of Porvenir, Florida, Piso Firme and Cachuela have a contract to sell 12,000 boxes of heart of palm per year to Chile through 2013. The fruit is being harvested sustainably at 10 different sites. The men of the communities harvest the fruit, and the women prepare and pack it for shipping.

A separate 30-year project involves the same four communities in a sustainable forestry project covering 222,390 acres outside the park boundaries. Men will harvest four species of native trees—cambará, paquió, tajibo and almen-drillo—and sell them to a Bolivian buyer for export to Europe. Eventually, residents will turn the logs into lumber at a sawmill in Aserraderra, and create marketable products such as furniture, doors and window frames.

Saving Plant Species

Orchids, bromeliads and other native Bolivian plant species can be moneymakers for poachers who steal them from natural areas. The objective of FAN's initiative GermaFAN is to quash that illegal market by breeding the native plants in special nurseries, then making them legally available to buyers. In 2002 alone, the project generated 24,000 bromeliads and orchids. Some 4,500 of the plants were made available commercially.

Financing Park Guards

Part of any park's success is tied to funding for management basics such as park guards and updated equipment. As these resources were sorely lacking at Noel Kempff Mercado, it once existed as a "paper park" because it was protected more in name than in reality. To address this problem, a portion of the money for the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project was used to start an endowment fund managed by the Conservancy.

More than a dozen local park guards have been hired. They are trained to carry out ground, river and aerial patrols, and regularly confiscate illegal fishing and hunting gear. Conservation trust fund money also helps local communities attain legal status as indigenous people and secure land tenure.

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