

CENTRAL SAVANNAS

The Great Plains of Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay



Grande Sertao Veredas National Park, Brazil © Bill Possiel/TNC

Savannas and grasslands cover some 40% of the world's land surface and are the world's most endangered biomes, largely due to the ease of their conversion to agriculture or urban uses. They generally receive less attention from the world's conservation community than the more charismatic rainforests, despite their high levels of plant diversity and the vulnerable "megafauna" they typically contain. South America is home to a remarkable array of these savannas and grasslands, ranging from the arid scrublands of Paraguay's "Gran Chaco" and the Brazilian "Caatinga" to the world's largest freshwater wetland, the Pantanal.

Covering some 1.4 million square miles, roughly the size of the North American Great Plains, these savanna ecoregions represent some of the most fragmented and least protected of Latin America's natural communities. The dominant threat is from poorly-managed agriculture – be it the hardscrabble subsistence agriculture of

Brazil's impoverished northeast or the large-scale soybean agribusiness of the Cerrado, the world's last great agricultural frontier.

Across Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay, the Conservancy is working with local conservation groups, government agencies and community leaders to conserve these impressive grasslands. In addition, the Conservancy's work in these tropical savanna ecoregions has drawn heavily on the technical input and expertise of Conservancy State Chapters, who are confronting similar conservation challenges in the U.S. Midwest

The Caatinga: Brazil's arid northeast

While Brazil is better known for the lush, flooded rainforests of the Amazon, about 11% of the country lies at the arid extreme of its ecosystems. The Caatinga is one of the driest, most densely populated regions in the world, and it is Latin America's most extensive pocket

of rural poverty. Long neglected by the international conservation community, the Caatinga has begun to attract global attention as the effects of desertification have consumed much of the biome's original native vegetation. What is left is under continuing assault from clearing for charcoal and subsistence agriculture. The Conservancy has identified the Caatinga as a high priority for conservation because of its unique ecology and numerous rare and endemic species.

In 1999, the Conservancy and a local conservation partner created the region's first significant private reserve, Serra das Almas, in the heart of the Caatinga. This preserve will guarantee a permanent refuge for the rare and threatened flora and fauna of these desertlands. The Conservancy is now focusing on the creation of three ecological corridors that will connect parks and other protected areas in order to ensure the survival of sufficient contiguous habitat for local wildlife populations.

The Cerrado: Brazil's disappearing "Great Plains"

In the center of the South American continent stretches the Cerrado, which is Brazil's equivalent of the North American Great Plains or Africa's Serengeti. A mosaic of open savanna and dry forest, the Cerrado covers a quarter of Brazil's land area and is the world's most biologically rich grassland for plant and bird diversity. Over the last 30 years, however, it has been cleared for large-scale industrial agriculture on a massive scale, becoming the world's new powerhouse of soybean and beef production. Today, only about 20% of the Cerrado's original native vegetation cover remains. Due to continued conversion to agriculture, the Cerrado is Brazil's most rapidly disappearing biome.

The Conservancy's Cerrado program is based on two fundamental strategies: designing and field-testing models to make agriculture more ecologically friendly; and supporting private initiatives and incentives to protect critical pieces of the Cerrado before they are plowed under. Our work with farmers around the 350,000-acre Emas National Park has developed and deployed best management practices for enhancing the environmental compatibility of agricultural production. With interested private landowners, meanwhile, we are actively creating new private nature reserves that will safeguard the Cerrado's most precious natural communities forever.

The Pantanal: The world's largest freshwater wetland

The Pantanal is the vast, Florida-sized floodplain of the Upper Paraguay River, which straddles the borders of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay (80% of it is located in

Brazil). When its floodwaters recede, aquatic life becomes concentrated in scattered pools, and the convergence of birds and animals to feed on it and breed make this the most spectacular wildlife phenomenon of the hemisphere. Though the floodplain remains one of the few relatively pristine large floodplain river systems in the world, the Pantanal is under immediate threats from infrastructure development and the impacts of large-scale agriculture in the surrounding Cerrado uplands.

The Conservancy is working with state governments in Brazil to develop a management program system for the watershed of the Cuiabá River, the most significant of the Pantanal watersheds. This system is being designed for replication throughout the entire Pantanal. In the surrounding Cerrado uplands, the Conservancy is focusing its compatible cattle ranching work on farmers in the Upper Paraguay River basin, to persuade them to adopt ecologically beneficial agricultural practices.

The Paraguayan Dry Chaco: The unspoiled frontier

The dry thorn forests and grasslands of the Chaco span western Paraguay, southeastern Bolivia and northwestern Argentina. Unlike the hard-hit Caatinga, the Chaco represents some of the most extensive unspoiled landscape of this type in Latin America. This expansive grass- and scrubland is under imminent threat, however, due to settlement pressures, ranching, and the construction of a new highway.

In 1997, the Conservancy began working with Paraguayan partner organization Fundación DeSdelChaco to protect the 2-million-acre Defensores del Chaco National Park. The Conservancy is now collaborating with a consortium of local conservation NGOs to secure a Dry Chaco Ecological Corridor – an area of more than 236,000 acres – which will connect three national parks in Paraguay with one national park in Bolivia, creating an unprecedented linked conservation landscape of 12 million acres.

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