



GUATEMALA

Safeguarding a Rich Cultural and Biological Heritage

conservation profile

action areas Gulf of Honduras, Maya Forest, Motagua/Polochic System, Sierra Madre Volcanoes

targets lowland tropical rainforests, mountain cloudforests, highland pine forests, watersheds feeding both the Gulf of Honduras and the Pacific Ocean, resplendent quetzal, jaguar, horned guan, manatee

stresses habitat fragmentation, erosion, deforestation due to agricultural expansion and timber harvesting, water pollution, population growth

strategies strengthen protected areas system, promote private lands and communal/private/municipal conservation, improve local institutional conservation capacities, strengthen conservation finance and policy mechanisms

results consolidated the Sierra de las Minas functional protected area, helped establish and broker co-management agreement for Lacandon National Park, developed the management plans for Tikal National Park.

partners National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP), The Guatemalan Conservation Trust Fund (FCG), Defensores de la Naturaleza, Vivamos Mejor, FUNDAECO, IDEADS, Association of Private Nature Reserves of Guatemala (ARNP), Universidad del Valle



From the volcanic cones of the western highlands to the jungle of the Maya Forest, Guatemala boasts an array of biodiversity. © Nicole Balloffet/The Nature Conservancy

No doubt the Mayans outdid themselves centuries ago by creating architectural wonders such as Tikal, now a national park and home to famous Mayan pyramids towering above Northern Guatemala's vast rainforest canopy. But it is Mother Nature's earlier handiwork—from the soaring volcanic cones of the western highlands to the lush jungle of the Maya Forest in the Peten, as well as the immense range of biodiversity found here—that makes this country one of the great natural and cultural gems of the Americas.

Roughly the size of Tennessee, Guatemala lies within the heart of the Mayan civilization, whose people and culture dominate the fabric of the

country to this day. Eastern Guatemala, nestled between Belize and Honduras, is graced by the crystal blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. To the West, a rich agricultural coastal plain gives way to mangrove wetlands and sea turtle breeding grounds where powerful Pacific surf crashes onto black volcanic sand stretching unbroken between Mexico and El Salvador.

After 300 years of brutal Spanish colonial rule, Guatemala gained independence in 1821. Unfortunately, many of the patterns of repression and exploitation continued, primarily affecting the country's indigenous population. The 20th century was marked by a series of military and civilian govern-



The Sierra Madre Volcanic Range frames Lake Atilán. ©Nicole Balloffet/The Nature Conservancy

ments, presiding over 36-years of civil strife that finally ended in 1996 when the quarrelling parties signed a series of peace accords. Today, Guatemala boasts the largest population and economy in Central America.

Conservation has an established history in Guatemala with officially designated protected areas covering over 22 percent of the country. This is in spite of unpredictable funding and support due to political instability, a high poverty level, an economy dominated by agriculture. Because of this, half of Guatemala's forests disappeared during a 35-year-period between 1954 and 1989 as a result of logging and the clearing of land for crops and cattle. Regions such as Cerro San Gil Protected Area on the Gulf of Honduras are suffering the secondary effects of deforestation in the form of rainfall reduction.

With this in mind, The Nature Conservancy is pursuing renewed enthusiasm for conservation through local initiatives that are compatible with sustainable economic development. Through a concerted, science-based effort to identify and protect key areas of montane moist forests, lowland rainforest, highland mixed pine-oak forests, thornscrub, and costal aquatic ecosystems, these conservation efforts are finally bearing fruit.

The Conservancy collaborates

with partners in four regions of Guatemala: the Maya Forest in the north, the Sierra Madre volcanoes in the western highlands, the Gulf of Honduras bordering Guatemala's Caribbean coastline and the east central Motagua/Polochic System, which is a mix of Atlantic humid forest, Central American dry pine-oak forest and the Motagua Valley thornscrub. The extremes in topography and climate from the frozen peaks of the highest volcanoes in Central America, to the desert-like conditions of the motagua valley, to steaming tropical lowland forests account for an astonishing array of biodiversity including species not found elsewhere in the region.

Conservation strategies are as diverse as the landscapes, due to Guatemala's unique character. While the purchase of land for the establishment of nature reserves is utilized here in select cases, high population density and age old conflicts of land tenure deem alternative strategies crucial. That's why it has been vital for the Conservancy, together with Guatemala-based partners to provide incentives for local people to protect and sustainably manage public and private lands. These approaches include helping farmers improve agricultural practices and encouraging private landowners to establish nature

reserves on their property. By working on agreed-upon conservation goals, the Conservancy, partners and citizens can have a long-lasting and far-reaching impact across Guatemala.

These strategies are insuring the permanent protection of Guatemala's cultural legacies, including an impressive array of ancient Mayan settlements, and the wealth of biodiversity inhabiting the surrounding landscapes, including some of the last significant parcels of humid tropical rainforests in all of Central America. Among the species being protected are more than 350 bird species- including some of the last significant populations of threatened varieties such as the horned guan and the resplendent quetzal, as well as many seasonal migrants passing between North and South/Central America. As a result of our work in this fascinating and enigmatic nation, it is obvious why Guatemala is quickly becoming known as a prime ecotourism destination within Central America.

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