



# OSA PENINSULA

*Protecting Costa Rica's Last "Wildland Frontier" and Its Surrounding Waters*



The Nature Conservancy helped the Costa Rican government create Corcovado National Park, which was formally declared in 1975, on the western part of the Osa Peninsula. ©David Woodfall

Once an island, the Osa Peninsula connected with the Central American isthmus millions of years ago. The resulting mix of terrestrial and marine animals, plants and ecosystems make it a fabulously unique area. These characteristics have earned the Osa Peninsula the title of the "last wild frontier" of Costa Rica.

The Peninsula's impressive flora and fauna and breathtaking landscapes have inspired conservationists, scientists and naturalists from around the world to protect this unique, yet highly threatened area. It is not uncommon for visitors to stumble across tapirs walking along the of isolated beaches, to be momentarily interrupted by a flock of scarlet macaws flying overhead or to be awakened by the calls of howler monkey welcoming the first rays of sunlight.

Located in the southwestern corner of Costa Rica, the peninsula is home to all 11 of the country's endangered mammals, at least 375 bird species and more than 2,000

documented plant species. Spectacular collections of mangroves and the largest remaining lowland forest in the Central American Pacific coast - boasting trees that measure 200 feet tall - grace this landscape.

Humpback whales and dolphins calve in the Pacific waters off the coast. The peninsula's beaches serve as rookeries for four species of sea turtle-the green, leatherback, hawksbill and olive ridley.

In 1974 The Nature Conservancy helped the Costa Rican government purchase 86,485 acres of land and consolidate the more than 100,000-acre Corcovado National Park located on the southwestern flank of the Osa peninsula. Today, a third of the peninsula is protected under some form of management.

Despite efforts to conserve the terrestrial and marine ecosystems of Osa, there are serious pressures threatening its ecological integrity. When humans made their way over

the towering Talamanca Cordillera to Osa during the early 20th century, they opened up the region to agricultural expansion, particularly banana plantations. Though the banana companies pulled out of southern Costa Rica in the 1980s, remaining roads opened this pristine site to loggers, hunters, gold miners, cattle ranchers and rice farmers.

The significant loss of habitat that occurred during this period, and which continues to date, has endangered populations of jaguar, puma, tapir, howler and spider monkeys, white-lipped and collared peccaries, and giant anteaters. Costa Rica's largest scarlet macaw population - 300 reproductive couples - is also in jeopardy, as are the remaining yellow-billed cotingas.

The Conservancy's long-term plan for the Peninsula calls for protecting as much of the one million-acre Osa Conservation Area as possible, in addition to surrounding marine environments. Collaborating with the government and other in-country partners, the Conservancy seeks to significantly improve park management, consolidate the protected areas, facilitate private lands conservation, and design and implement financial mechanisms that will ensure the long-term protection of this paradise.

### **Campaign for Osa**

The Conservancy is taking part in the International Campaign for the Osa, a fundraising partnership that includes Conservation International, the Costa Rica-USA Foundation for Cooperation (CRUSA) and the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment and Energy. The \$31.5 million raised by this effort will address short-term protection needs in Osa. The funds will also provide a long-term endowment for the management of public protected areas, acquisition of lands in Piedras Blancas National Park and promotion of private conservation initiatives in the Osa Biological Corridor.

### **Creating Connectivity for Conservation**

Corcovado and Piedras Blancas National Parks, two of the largest tracts of remaining forested land in the Osa Peninsula, are separated by the 100,000-acre Golfo Dulce Forestry Reserve, a complex mosaic of land uses including agriculture and semi-urban settlements as well as forests and wetlands. Here the Conservancy and the Osa Coalition, a group of local non-governmental organizations, are working to consolidate the proposed Osa Biological Corridor, which is primarily in private hands.

Since very few residents living within the corridor have proper title to the land the Conservancy has engaged the locally based Environmental and Natural Resource Law Center (CEDARENA) in completing a land tenure study to determine the legal status of each property in the

corridor and designing a private lands conservation strategy. The Osa Coalition, with support from the Conservancy, will implement the strategy and will work with landowners to employ protection tools like conservation easements, and in a few cases, outright land purchases.

### **Consolidating of Piedras Blancas National Park**

Piedras Blancas National Park was established by the government of Costa Rica in the early 1990s. However, due to fiscal constraints, most lands were not paid off. As a result half of the park remains in private ownership and vulnerable to activities that run counter to conservation efforts. In order to protect the ecological integrity of this important area, the Conservancy has committed to raising \$1.5 million for the purchase and protection of unpaid lands.

### **Coastal and Marine Conservation in Osa**

The coastal and marine areas of Osa host a range of important species, systems and resources including sharks and coral reefs threatened by both land and water-based activities. The Conservancy is working with more than twenty local organizations, fishermen's groups and government agencies to conduct Costa Rica's first marine Conservation Area Plan (CAP). To date the group has identified conservation targets, threats and their sources, and is designing strategies to protect this magnificent and biologically rich area. This process is part of the Conservancy's efforts to launch a marine conservation initiative for the Osa Peninsula, which will complement terrestrial work currently being carried out.

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