

# HONDURAN MOSQUITIA

## *Community Conservation in the Mosquito Coast*



### conservation profile

**targets** broadleaf forest, miskito pine savanna, coastal wetlands, rivers, ocean, beach, archeological sites

**stresses** agricultural advancement, introduction of exotic and invasive species, inadequate agricultural and grazing practices, local fishing and others

**strategies** enforce existing laws and natural resource use regulations for the reserve, design community and municipal management and protection plans, establish an environmental protection plan, develop and implement upper watershed management plans

**results** coordinated a participatory threat analysis for lagoon systems and coastal wetlands, helped community leaders understand the impacts of agriculture and ranching on watersheds, organized bi-national forum to analyze and discuss shared conservation issues with partners; formulated of a long-term financial plan for the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

**partners** MOPAWI, PROYECTO BIOSFERA, AFE-COHDEFOR, SERNA



river and forest near Ahuas, Río Plátano © Lynda Richardson

Writer Paul Theroux might have put northeastern Honduras on the literary map with his 1982 book “The Mosquito Coast,” but the area had already been on conservationists’ radar for several decades prior.

In 1980, a significant area of the Honduran Mosquitia’s remarkable moist forest, Caribbean coast, mangroves, wetlands and lagoons received permanent protection when the Honduran government set aside 2 million acres (809,400 hectares) as the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. The preserve grew by an additional 13,838 acres in the 1990’s and received another boost in 1999 when the Honduran government, respond-

ing to suggestions from indigenous communities, named two new protected areas to link Río Plátano with the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in Nicaragua. The resulting 5 million-acre corridor represents the largest contiguous, legally protected area in Central America.

Río Plátano features the only Miskito pine savanna in the world that is legally under protection. Mahogany, Spanish cedar, oak trees, and 500 other tree and plant species provide prime habitat for jaguars, Baird’s tapirs, white-lipped peccaries and white-faced capuchin monkeys. Great green macaws, harpy eagles and great curassows are counted among the 410



Rio Platano at Ahuas © Lynda Richardson

bird species. Sharks, manatees, sea turtles, fish and shrimp eat and breed within the coastal waters.

The region has a rich cultural history, to match its biodiversity as evidenced by the 200-plus archeological sites. Five distinct ethnic communities call the Mosquitia home: the Miskito, Tawahka and Pech indigenous groups; the Garífuna (descendants of African and Carib peoples); and the Ladino (descendants of Spanish and indigenous peoples).

Even in this remote and unpopulated area threats loom. Local people and commercial companies are overfishing coastal waters. Mahogany trees and other hardwoods are illegally harvested and sold, mangroves are cut for firewood and land is cleared for crops and cattle. The Conservancy and its partners in Honduras and Nicaragua are collaborating with local people to preserve the Mosquitia's irreplaceable resources through a cross-border long-term conservation plan. Two of the most successful conservation strategies involve devising a watershed protection plan and organizing an effort to protect sea turtles.

### **Saving Their Own Backyard**

With such a large expanse to protect, the Conservancy, government officials, community members and

Honduran partner MOPAWI (an non-governmental organization working with local indigenous communities) began protection efforts by defining priorities and hammering out a large-scale, long-term protection plan. Local scientists and residents were trained to gather ecological and socioeconomic data, leading to the first comprehensive survey of biodiversity and human communities in the Río Plátano reserve.

One top priority that emerged was protection of the 26 lagoons skirting the Río Plátano's Caribbean coast. The indigenous communities fish and navigate the waters that are also essential to endangered marine species such as manatees. Laguna de Ibans, one of the largest lagoons, will likely serve as a protection model. A plan is being devised to protect the watershed that feeds it and the mangrove forests that support shrimp and fish.

### **Turtle Rescue**

Leatherback and loggerhead turtles once thrived on the Honduran Caribbean coast. Today, both are endangered due to overharvesting of eggs—a local delicacy—and other factors. With support from the Conservancy and its partners, volunteers from the Garífuna commu-

nity of Plaplaya formed the Marine Turtle Conservation Project in the mid-1990s.

More than 115 volunteers now scour beaches for turtle nests from September to July, transplanting the nests to protected areas, and releasing hatchlings at night when chances of survival are better. More than 8,300 hatchlings have been released to date. Much of this is due to environmental programs that have been incorporated into local elementary school curriculums, and to enlightened fishermen now motivated to release turtles they catch in their nets.

The most-convincing testimonial for the Marine Turtle Conservation Project comes from a participant. The friend he was fishing with caught a turtle in his net, and wouldn't let it go because he feared he'd lose the fish he netted. The participant in the turtle conservation project would not let his friend back into the fishing boat until he released the turtle. Eventually, the turtle was set free.

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