



South America Conservation Region: Northern Tropical Andes

# SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA

*Conserving Colombia's Most Biologically Diverse Treasure*



Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta © Pilar Barrera/TNC

Colombia is one of the five most biologically diverse countries on the planet. Occupying less than 0.08% of the Earth's surface, one of every ten species of plants and animals in the world can be found here.

Perched along the northern edge of Colombia lies the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which rises abruptly from the Caribbean coast to an altitude of nearly 19,000 feet, making it the highest coastal mountain in the world. The Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is one of the most distinctive, diverse and threatened areas in South America. It encompasses 4.2 million acres and is home to an array of species found nowhere else on Earth.

In 1979, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta was declared a "Man and the Biosphere Reserve" by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), one of only some 400 such reserves

worldwide. Tapirs, red brocket deer and red howler monkeys, along with jaguar, puma and little spotted cat are found in the area. The Sierra Nevada also harbors 46 species of amphibians and reptiles; those that live above 9,900 feet have evolved in complete isolation and are found nowhere else on Earth.

An amazing 628 bird species have been recorded across the Sierra—approximately the number found in the United States and Canada combined. Twenty-four of those bird species are found nowhere else on Earth. At least 71 species of migratory birds that travel between Colombia and North America have also been recorded here. In addition, more than 3,000 species of vascular plants have been found in the Sierra.

Present-day inhabitants of the Sierra include four indigenous groups - the Kogi, the Arhuaco, the Arsario



Indigenous tribesman of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta © Cathy Kerkam/TNC

and the Kankoama - all of whom were living here long before the arrival of Europeans in the early 1500s. Today, some 30,000 indigenous people, 200,000 farmers and 1.5 million urbanites rely on the Sierra's watersheds for their fresh water supply. Yet, widespread deforestation throughout the Sierra is threatening biodiversity and the livelihoods of indigenous groups while jeopardizing economic and social activities (such as tourism) that depend on these forests.

The Nature Conservancy and Colombia partner Fundación Pro-Sierra began working in the Sierra in the early 1990s. During the first five years the Conservancy supported a Parks in Peril Program in the Sierra. As a part of this project, the Conservancy conducted a Rapid Ecological Assessment (REA) to identify priority conservation areas across the region.

For the last several years, the Sierra's indigenous groups have been seeking to reacquire traditional sacred sites where their ancient rituals have been performed through the centuries. The Conservancy, along with Fundación Pro-Sierra Nevada and indigenous leaders, identified specific areas where sacred sites and critical conservation areas overlap. The Conservancy is in the process of purchasing these lands and returning them to indigenous ownership. Since 1999, the Conservancy has supported the purchase of over 10,000 acres of the Sierra's most biologically important and threatened lands.

To complement the land acquisition project, the Conservancy is seeking to support its partners in the implementation of a sustainable development project with nearby communities and local government. This project aims at reducing forest loss across the Sierra by promoting organic produce, environmental education, fair trade, and watershed management practices. As an added benefit, the Conservancy will support Pro-Sierra's ecoregional conservation skills through this project.

## Why the Conservancy works in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta:

- The Sierra's four indigenous groups have recently formed a unified and powerful coalition. The Conservancy is now working with this group to identify and purchase critical traditional and ecologically significant lands across the entire Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.
- Expansion of the existing boundaries of these two indigenous reserves under Colombian land reform law.
- Guaranteed indigenous ownership of lands, with the opportunity for conservation in perpetuity.
- Expansion of the geographic scope of TNC's land acquisition program in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.
- Because it's a unique and threatened region.

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