

SOUTH AMERICA

Conserving a continent



More bird species are found in South America than on any other continent; Plate-billed Mountain Toucan (*Andigena laminirostris*), Ecuador © Pete Oxford

Before about 3 million years ago, South America was an island continent, left on its own as a cauldron for creation of new forms of life. Years of isolation plus spectacular geography produced a sum of unparalleled biological diversity. Steamy rainforest jungles, expansive grasslands, snow-covered Andean peaks and dazzling coral reefs are all part of the equation. South America's 70,000 plant species give it No. 1 ranking among continents. It also has more bird species than any other continent – in fact, one out of every three bird species lives in South America. More than 80 percent of its animal and plant species are found nowhere else on the planet. Moreover, this biodiversity is located in some of the most spectacular natural settings on Earth, and across vast regions whose very names suggest remoteness and wildness: Patagonia, the Amazon, the Orinoco, the Pantanal...

As is the case in much of the world, stresses to South America's intact natural landscapes are formidable and growing. Large tracts of land have been cleared in recent

years for cities, ranching and agriculture. Roads are being built into previously pristine areas, minerals are being mined and oil wells are being drilled. Not only are natural communities at risk, but the health and livelihoods of human communities are also in peril, as forests are logged, soils are exhausted and waterways are silted. South America's impressive system of national and other parks, meanwhile, suffers from a lack of attention and meager budgets. These parks are the jewels of South America's native lands and waters, the continent's last great places, and they urgently need our help.

Conservation opportunities abound

Though the challenges are daunting, The Nature Conservancy can already point to numerous significant conservation victories in South America. In our more than 20 years of conservation action in the region, we have worked within and across political and ecological boundaries and in close collaboration with local



Threatened vicuña (*Lama vicugna*) in the Peruvian Andes © Tui De Roy/Minden Pictures

organizations and communities. Conservancy projects in South America currently target landscape-scale conservation programs in eight countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. Our key long-term goals are to keep native forests standing, create wildlife corridors, protect grasslands and coastal areas, and make sure that rivers can nourish not only surrounding habitats, but the people who count on them for clean water.

“Results you can walk around on”

In just the past few years, the Conservancy has placed hundreds of thousands of acres of at-risk forests, grasslands and wetlands into permanent protection in South America. Last year we turned a bankruptcy into a protection opportunity by purchasing, with partners, 147,500 acres of biologically rich temperate rain forest in southern Chile’s Valdivian Coastal Range. The land was put on the auction block after a logging company went bankrupt.

Meanwhile, as part of an initiative to combat global climate change, the Conservancy and local partners have brought together unprecedented alliances with corporations to save more than a million forested acres in Bolivia and Brazil. And it doesn’t end there. We have brought lasting protection to gems as diverse as the wetlands of the Pantanal, the islands of the Galapagos, the unique deserts of Brazil’s northeast, Paraguay’s rich Atlantic forests and the Llanos of Venezuela.

Right now, the Conservancy is designing long-term sustainable forestry plans for communities living in the Bolivian Amazon and in the neighboring Chiquitano forest. In the lush valleys and hillsides of the tropical Andes of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, the Conservancy is providing economic incentives for local landowners to protect their woodlots, thereby creating forest corridors for animals like the spectacled bear. Deep in the Brazilian Amazon, the Conservancy helps

indigenous communities use modern satellite images to manage their lands in a way that will protect both their way of life and the surrounding biological treasures. Across the border in Peru, we and an in-country partner have made it possible for local communities to create co-operatives that regulate the harvest of palm fruits, fish and turtles that people count on to feed their families and earn a living.

Influencing local policy

Our on-the-ground, science-based work is supported by a new emphasis on government relations and conservation policy. This allows the Conservancy to contribute to the design and implementation of nationwide conservation strategies that actively engage local, state and national government agencies. Recently, for instance, the Conservancy was a key player in negotiating Debt-for-Nature Swaps with the governments of Peru and Colombia. Debts owed by these two countries to the U.S. government have now been redirected towards local conservation initiatives: \$10 million in Colombia to protect national parks, and \$3.5 million in Peru for rain-forest protection in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve.

Never-ending conservation story

The “conservation checklist” for a continent the size of South America is understandably long. But our goals are achievable if we continue to collaborate with partners to preserve these amazing landscapes for future generations. It seems only right that South Americans and visitors to the continent should be allowed to experience the same sensation that British naturalist Charles Darwin described when he journeyed there aboard *The Beagle* nearly two centuries ago:

“But when on shore, & wandering in the sublime forests, surrounded by views more gorgeous than. . . ever imagined, I enjoy a delight which none but those who have experienced it can understand.”

contact information

South America Conservation Region

Ana Garcia, Senior Resource Information Officer

4245 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 100

Arlington, VA 22203 USA

agarcia@tnc.org

tel [703] 841.2066

fax [703] 841.4880

nature.org