



## COLOMBIA

# Socio-environmental management of the Caquetá-Japurá River basin

by Dr Martín von Hildebrand, Founder Director of Gaia Amazonas

The Caquetá-Japurá River basin, stretching across Colombia and into Brazil, could become a refuge for Amazon biodiversity and one of the last remnants of the Amazon biome as we know it. According to scientists, this northwest region of the Amazon Basin – with its proximity to the Andean mountains, which allow for a greater retention of humidity – will be least affected while global warming and deforestation convert 30-60% of the Amazon rainforest into savannah.

A new partnership between Rainforest Concern and Gaia Amazonas is making possible the conservation of 83% of natural forest in the Colombian side of the Caquetá-Japurá River basin, strategies to halt deforestation, the promotion of Andes-Amazon biological corridors, and the articulation of conservation initiatives between Colombia and Brazil.

The Caquetá-Japurá River basin is one of the main tributaries for the Amazon Basin, with a catchment, which covers 275,574 km<sup>2</sup> (211,557 km<sup>2</sup> in Colombia). The Caquetá River rises in the Andes of southwest Colombia. From the headwaters, the river moves in a southeast direction through the foothills (piedemonte) where the Andean mountain range meets the Amazon, an ecoregion with great biological diversity. The river continues its path through the lowlands, alluvial plains and rocky outcrops of the Guyana shield landscape, and flows

across the border into Brazil, where it is called the Japurá River and later joins the Amazon River.

In the higher region of the river basin, in the foothills, 80% of natural forest has already been lost due to the human impact of colonization, the expanding agricultural frontier, illegal crops, and timber extraction. The middle and lower regions are better protected with indigenous territories and protected areas aimed at biodiversity conservation. Nevertheless, even here the impact of extractive industries, such as gold mining, along with the insatiable demand for biofuels and coca, mean that deforestation is advancing.

Rainforest Concern has partnered with Fundación Gaia Amazonas, a Colombian organization, to promote the conservation and shared management of the Caquetá-Japurá River basin, bringing together indigenous territories, national protected areas and other local actors.

Gaia Amazonas, founded in the early 1990s by Martín von Hildebrand, is committed to forest conservation based on indigenous people's rights and empowering local communities - to ensure the future of different cultures, traditions and the Amazon forest on which they, and we, depend. For more than 15 years, Gaia Amazonas has been working with indigenous people in the Colombian Amazon, mostly along the Caquetá, Apaporis, Mirití, Guainía, Isana, Tiquié, Putumayo and Igará Paraná Rivers. This constitutes 40% of the Colombian Amazon with indigenous communities from more than 17 main ethnic groups. It also coordinates an alliance of non-government and indigenous organizations in the northwest Amazon to promote transboundary forest conservation.

The Caquetá-Japurá River basin presents a number of special characteristics that make this an exciting and vital initiative for the Amazon. Firstly, the Caquetá is the largest river basin in the Colombian Amazon. Within the basin there are 73 Indigenous resguardos and nine national protected areas, covering 117,755 km<sup>2</sup>. The majority (95,164 km<sup>2</sup>) are located in the middle to lower regions. Another 50,000 km<sup>2</sup>, also in the middle region, form part of the Amazon Forestry Reserve - a legal



photo: RAINFOREST CONCERN

**Martín von Hildebrand**

figure aimed at the protection of soils, waters and forest, although forestry activities and economies are permitted. The area of most concern is the higher region and the foothills, which are among the most deforested areas in the Colombian Amazon and heavily colonized.

On the Brazilian side, there are ongoing initiatives for protection through conservation units and indigenous lands, and these provide continuity to the forest areas that are already afforded some protection in the middle and lower Caquetá River on the Colombian side. While there is exchange and linking on both sides of the border, what is missing is an integrated management plan to connect the higher part of the river basin.



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**Matapi children**

With support from Rainforest Concern, baseline information on the socio-environmental situation of the Caquetá-Japurá River was compiled. The baseline information takes into account the differing contexts - historical, political, social, cultural, economic and environmental - between the higher region and the middle-lower regions of the basin. It has allowed Gaia Amazonas to update data for its Geographic Information System (GIS), to produce digital maps, and for preliminary guidelines aimed at shared conservation and management of the river basin.



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**Inside a Matapi molla**