



COLOMBIA

Strengthening conservation in the Colombian Chocó Mountains

by David Caro, Director Proaves

Compressed between the Pacific coast and the snow-clad High Andes, the Colombian Chocó Mountains are home to one of the greatest concentrations of unique biodiversity on the planet. Its phenomenal importance to life on earth is thanks in part to its equatorial location. Sitting astride the mighty Andes the region is assured of rainfall throughout the year across its many elevated life zones. These conditions are accentuated in the foothills and premontane zone, where rainfall levels peak and montane and lowland fauna and flora types collide. This has resulted in an extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna in what is a relatively tiny tropical enclave; remarkably still much is to be learnt of the regions biodiversity as researchers discover more and more new species of birds, frogs, orchids, and butterflies that inhabit this fascinating region.

The Chocó is also of great cultural importance because the heart of the Chocó, in south-western Colombia, is inhabited by the Awá (pronounced ah-WAH) whose homeland has been greatly reduced thanks to outside colonization. In recent years this has been compounded by large infrastructure developments including a major highway, which runs from Tumaco on the Pacific coast, through the middle of the Chocó forests, to the city of Pasto, high in the Andes.



The cloudforest of the Pangan Reserve

The highway has pierced through the heart of the wettest tropical forests on the planet and allowed a torrent of non-native colonists to invade the area. The long-isolated Awa tribes were rapidly pushed back away from the highway as forests were invaded and systematically destroyed for unsustainable pastureland and uncontrolled timber exploitation. Today, the Awa community remains divided and segregated by a highway that has left in its wake a wide swathe of deforested wasteland, now legally held by colonists.

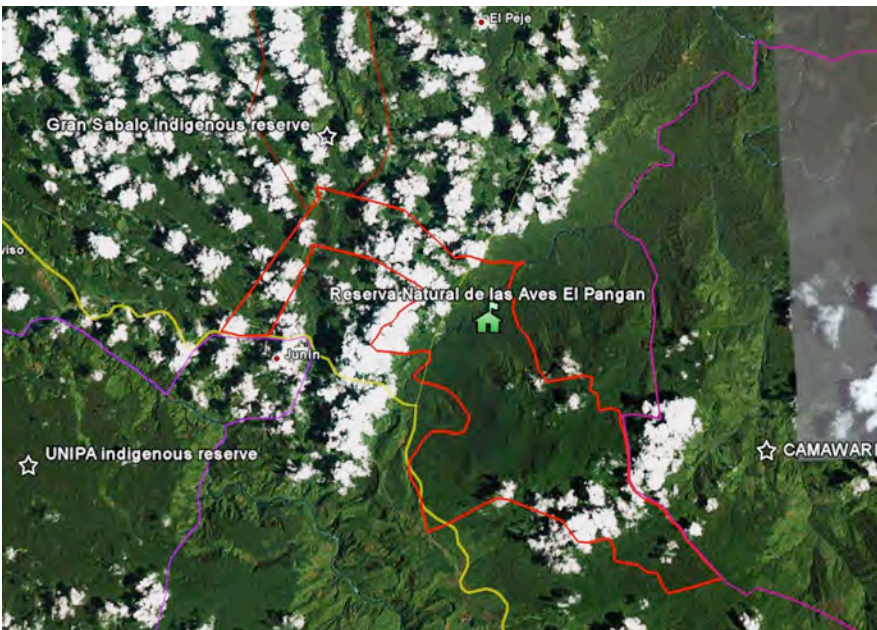
In a bold initiative, Rainforest Concern and the Colombian foundation Rainforest Colombia teamed up to buy back land from colonists along the highway between the indigenous reserves.

In 2007 and early 2008, with support from Rainforest Concern and the Planet Foundation, Rainforest Colombia acquired six properties of foothill and lowland tropical forest totalling 2,842 acres. These acquisitions, from non-indigenous colonists, established a corridor four miles long and almost one mile wide. Importantly this corridor connects together three separated indigenous reserves; the CAMAWARI reserve (296,500 acres), the UNIPA reserve (499,100 acres) and El Gran Sabalo reserve (5,000 acres) as well as the El Pangan Nature Reserve, which covers an area of 11,998 acres.

Thanks to the strategic purchasing of 2,842 acres we have been able to establish one of the most important biological and cultural corridors in the Neotropics – today over 800,000 acres (326,800 hectares) of one of the most important bio-diverse regions in the world is now unified and protected. Furthermore, the Colombian reserves extend to the Colombian-Ecuadorian border from where it also borders the Ecuadorian reserve of the indigenous Awa people and Rainforest Concern's Awacachi corridor.

So for the first time since colonists invaded the area over 100 years ago to divide and isolate the indigenous Awa people, we have created a biological and cultural corridor that protects the heart of this Chocó hotspot.

With your assistance it is hoped that the Pangan Reserve may be further extended in 2009.



Aerial photograph of the Pangan Reserve, Southwest Colombia