

Progress of the Paso Alto Project, the Southern Choco-Andean Corridor

by Jefferson Mecham, Director of ALLPA

Situated in northwest Ecuador, Paso Alto, which covers over 5000 hectares (12,355 acres), is the largest extension of forest within the southern Choco-Andean Corridor Project. In 2006 the regional coffee growers association AACRI, ALLPA (a partner organisation) and Rainforest Concern signed an important agreement with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment. Over the past year the Management Plan for the Paso Alto Protected Forest Reserve has made major advances securing both local government and community support to complete a plan designed to establish long-term sustainability within the region. Initial opposition to the management plan came from those community members who believed that the forest's protected status would have a detrimental impact, depriving them of their land and livelihoods.



Chestnut mandibled toucan, frequently seen in these forests



The dense forests of Paso Alto

Thanks to previous studies carried out by the projects promoters those concerns were addressed with the initiation of a pilot scheme. Started in 2007, the agroforestry project, established native species/ tropical fruit/ organic coffee plantations in the communities of Paso Alto. The aim of the pilot scheme was to earn the trust of local communities by conserving the regions forests through the development of sustainable agroforestry alternatives.

During the project's pilot phase, March 2007 - May 2008, participating farmers successfully established 22 one-hectare agroforestry parcels on their land: 11 in the community of Barrio Nuevo and 11 in Bella Vista. The plantations included a variety of species - coffee, fruits, and native hardwoods - and over 15,000 plants divided into the 22 parcels. The success of these 22 parcels has attracted a group of 16 farmers in the neighbouring community of Playa Rica (also in the area of influence of Paso Alto) to participate in the project since the summer of 2008. Over the same period eight new parcels have been planted in Bellavista.

An integral part of the pilot scheme was to provide participants with regular training and technical assistance; this included agroforestry design and planting methods, and plantation management. In addition to this, local farmer-promoters - one from Bellavista and one from Barrio Nuevo - received additional training in agroforestry systems, with field trips to observe organic production methods and coffee cultivation. This initial pilot for the project has garnered the vital community support for conservation and participation in the management plan of the Paso Alto Protected Forest Reserve. In the summer of 2008 we were able to com-

plete the management plan workshops in the community of Bellavista. Attended by local government officials and professionals from the Environment Ministry, participants, who now had a clear understanding of how conservation can help improve their lands and livelihoods, were enthusiastic in their support. The pilot phase accomplished its purpose and now needs to become a fully implemented project to establish this process and leave it firmly on the path of sustainability. Rainforest Concern are currently fundraising for this.

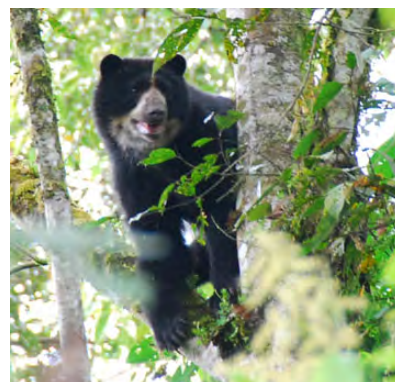


photo: LUIS DIE

Spectacled bears will benefit directly from this project