

Increasing tropical rainforest protection for over 5 million hectares of the Colombian Amazon

by Natalia Hernández and Martín von Hildebrand, Fundación Gaia Amazonas

Colombia's Amazon region occupies 42%, almost 50 million hectares, of the country's land surface and forms part of the Northwest Amazon region where, according to 75% of models on the impacts of climate change in South America, the Amazon biome will be conserved. Protecting the Amazon forest in Colombia should not just be a national but a global priority.

Since 2007 Rainforest Concern has partnered with Fundación Gaia Amazonas, to promote the shared socio-environmental management of the Caquetá River basin in the Colombian Amazon, and baseline research in this region has made it possible to identify main threats to the Colombian Amazon in general. In particular, Rainforest Concern supports the expansion of protected areas and indigenous resguardos over 5 million hectares and the building of local capacity of the indigenous people to manage these territories based on their traditional knowledge and practices.



Photo: Annamaria Guerra, FGA

La Pedrera on the Rio Caquetá

The Caquetá River basin occupies 44% of the Colombian Amazon (21 million hectares) and, with the neighbouring Putumayo and Negro River basins, they form the country's entire Amazon region.

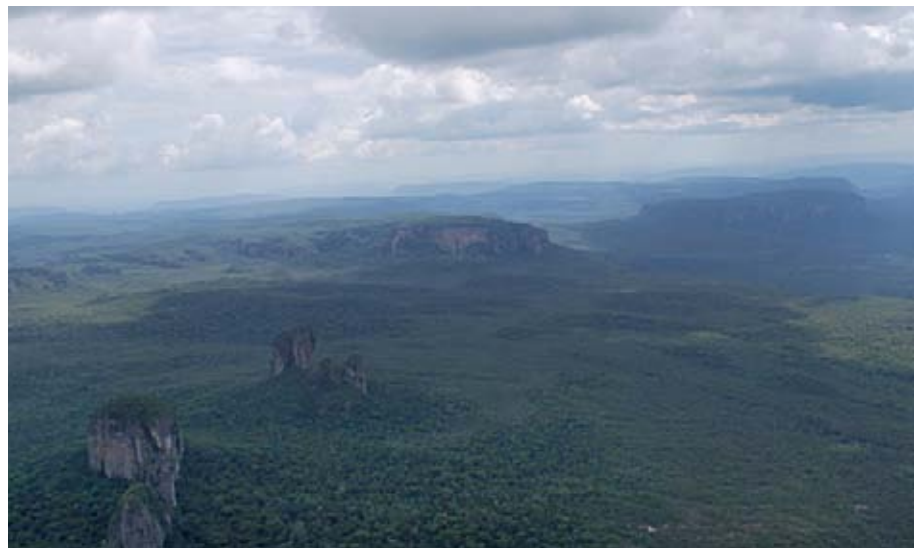


Photo: Rodrigo Botero, DTAC

Stunning panorama of Serranía de Chiribiquete - proposed area for the project's expansion

For that reason, from the baseline research on the Caquetá River basin carried out with the support of Rainforest Concern, it has been possible to identify the main threats to conservation of the Colombian Amazon, and to establish guidelines for promoting its protection and sustainable development.

At present, the Colombian Amazon is in danger due to three interdependent and structural problems: (i) the lack of articulated public policies, (ii) undervaluing of the region and its indigenous people and (iii) the lack of spaces for articulation between government and non-government actors. This scenario of limited environmental governance has meant that the expansion of the agricultural frontier, the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons, mining (legal and illegal), and the development of infrastructure, are now the greatest threats to conservation and the main vectors for deforestation.

To tackle this situation, some priority lines of action have been drafted, aimed at consolidating the protection of the Amazon forest through the expansion of indigenous resguardos and protected areas, and the strengthening of environmental governance based on local processes and institutional articulation.



Photo: Rainforest Concern

Dr Martín von Hildebrand and friend

The main achievements during 2009 and the first half of 2010 are:

1. Creation of a Protected Area over the Yaigojé Apaporis resguardo

Gaia Amazonas played an active role in the negotiations, studies and necessary documentation for the declaration of this new protected area, together with the indigenous organization ACIYA (Association of Indigenous Captains of the Yaigojé Apaporis), the National Parks Administration (UAESPNN – Unidad de Parques Nacionales) and its Amazonia-Orinoquía Division (DTAO – Dirección Territorial Amazonia Orinoquía), the Natural Sciences Institute of Colombia's National University, and the Office for Ethnic Affairs of the Ministry for the Interior and Justice. This required the preparation of a socio-economic and cultural description, a biophysical description, maps showing the boundaries of the area, a comprehensive proposal to the Colombian Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences for its declaration as a new protected area, and prior consultation in the region.

As a result, the Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park, which will be managed by the local indigenous population and covers their ancestral territories, was created and formally declared on 27th October 2009 (Resolution #2079 of October 27th 2009, Ministry for the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development) with an area of 1,056,023 hectares within the Vaupés and Amazonas departments. This is the first National Park created with the purpose of protecting the material and immaterial values of the indigenous peoples, which are associated with the conservation, use and management of the territory and the protected area.

This new National Natural Park will also ensure the protection of ecosystems and sacred sites,

including the sub-soil, against mining exploration and exploitation that is permitted by Ingeominas and carried out by the Canadian company Cosigo Frontier Resources. A great success! See box 1 for more information.

2. Development of a “Strategy for Environmental Governance for the conservation and sustainable development of the Colombian Amazon”

The Caquetá River Basin management strategy promoted by Gaia Amazonas, provided a common platform for Gaia Amazonas, the Amazonía-Orinoquía Division of National Parks and the Natural Patrimony Fund (FPN - Fondo Patrimonio Natural), to build a strategy for the conservation and sustainable development of the Colombian Amazon, with environmental governance as the central focus. The strategy has six components or specific objectives, as follows:

- a. To consolidate conservation of the Colombian Amazon forest through expanding the Chiribiquete National Natural Park by 5 million hectares.
- b. Pilot project in local governance and territorial ordering in the zones most affected by colonization in the Colombian Amazon.
- c. Pilot project for conservation incentives and environmental governance over 4 million hectares of indigenous territories under the jurisdiction of Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities, ACAIPI, ACIYA, ACIMA and PANI.
- d. Formal spaces for trans-boundary articulation, built between States and with civil society participation, to implement agreements aimed at territorial ordering.

- e. To develop and strengthen social and institutional capacities at the local, regional and national levels, to implement strategies for conservation and environmental governance over 35 million hectares of the Colombian Amazon, for conservation and environmental governance over 35 million hectares of the Colombian Amazon.
- f. To formalize the areas for discussion and cross-sectoral policy-making on development and conservation of the Colombian Amazon.

The strategy supported by the Ministry of the Environment, the National Department of Planning, the International Cooperation and Social Action - Presidency of the Republic Agency, as well as to the International Table of Donors for the Amazon. The strategy has been well received by indigenous organizations, NGOs and local government entities; and various international cooperation agencies have expressed an interest in financing the initiative.

3. Expansion of two indigenous resguardos (Mirití Paraná and Nonuya de Villazul)

Gaia Amazonas accompanied the requests for expanding the territory covered by Mirití Paraná and Nonuya de Villazul resguardos, and supported the required studies and documentation. The requests for increasing the coverage of these resguardos were handed to INCODER (Colombian Institute for Rural Development), the government entity responsible for establishing or expanding indigenous resguardos. In December 2009 the Board of Directors of INCODER approved the expansion of these indigenous resguardos by 420,000 hectares. This decision was recently officialised and will be published soon in the Official Journal.

Colombia's Amazon region occupies 42% (almost 50 million hectares) of the country's land surface and forms part of the Northwest Amazon region.



Photo: Pete Oxford

A spider monkey

Yaigojé-Apaporis: protecting the “Jaguar’s haven” from mining

by Natalia Hernández and Martín von Hildebrand, Fundación Gaia Amazonas

On 27th October 2009, the Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park was officially declared Colombia’s 55th, and the third largest, national protected area - Resolution #2079, Ministry for the Environment, Housing and Territorial Development. It covers more than 1,056,523 hectares of forest at the intersection of the Amazon Basin and the Guiana Shield, and will be managed by the indigenous inhabitants.

This vast swathe of tropical forest, which straddles the Caquetá River and its tributary, the Apaporis River, is teeming with tropical forest biodiversity - 1,683 vascular plant species, 362 bird species, 443 different types of butterfly, more than 200 fish species, and at least 16 species of mammal that are threatened or at risk of extinction, such as the giant ant-eater, squirrel monkey, jaguar, manatee, and the pink dolphin. It is home to the Macuna, Tanimuca, Letuama, Cabiayari, Barazano, Yujup-Macu and Yauna – ethnic groups, each with their own language but a shared cultural identity, who continue their traditional practices for safeguarding the forest. For them, the many streams, lakes, natural springs, salt licks, rocks and other natural features of their territory are considered ‘sacred natural sites’, each with its own spirit guardian.

Yaigojé means “Jaguar’s haven”, referring to a spiritual figure that gives the local indigenous people wisdom about their culture and their natural surroundings.

Since 1985, this stretch of forest around the Apaporis River has been legally recognised as one of the many indigenous territories, or ‘resguardos’ (collectively owned areas of ancestral land) of the Colombian Amazon. However this status, under existing Colombian legislation, does not provide the indigenous communities with rights to the sub-soil; nor did it provide them with legal recourse when Cosigo Resources, a Canadian gold-mining company, began prospecting in the area three years ago.

The idea to create a national park was, to a large degree, a last resort. Faced with increasing pressure from Cosigo Resources and other companies to access the minerals and petroleum found in the Colombian Amazon, and a flood of permissions being handed out by the Ministry for Mines, the traditional indigenous authorities (elders and traditional knowledge holders) saw it



Photo: Rodrigo Batlero, DTIAO

View showing the advance of colonisation in the Caqueta basin

as the most viable strategy to protect the forest and their territory. Gaia Amazonas enabled their local organization ACIYA -Asociación de Capitanes Indígenas del Yaigojé Apaporis – to begin talks with National Parks of Colombia and to prepare a comprehensive proposal to the Colombian Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences for its declaration as a new protected area.

The Yaigojé Apaporis National Natural Park will be managed by the local indigenous population

and covers their ancestral territories. This is the first National Park in Colombia with the purpose of protecting the material and immaterial values of the indigenous peoples, and enabling them to continue as protagonists in the conservation, use and management of the protected area.

We wish to specifically thank Rainforest Concern and the Planet Foundation for their continued enthusiasm and support in assisting Gaia Amazonas to protect this huge and pristine region of the Colombian Amazon.

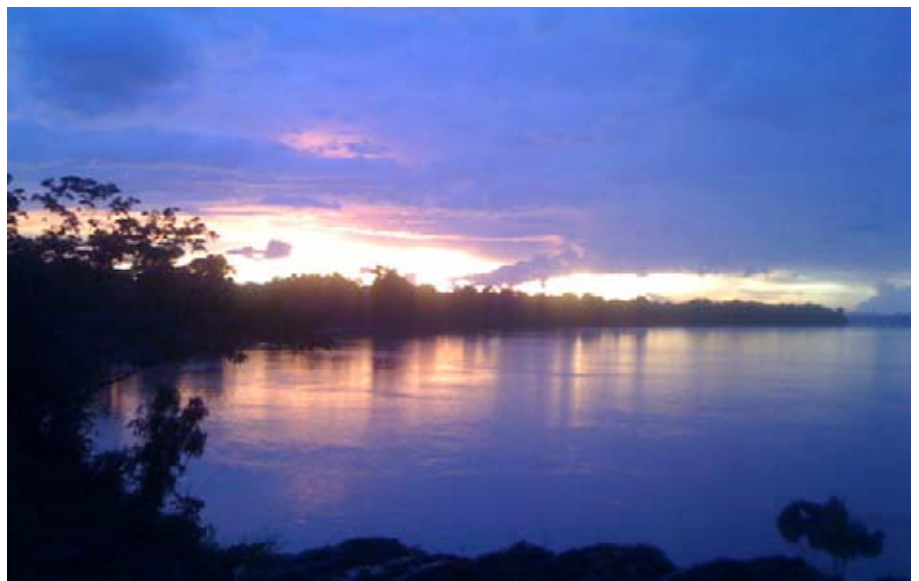


Photo: Rainforest Concern

An evening on the Caqueta river