



FROM *Peril* TO PROGRESS

by Danielle S. Furlich

Since 1990, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Agency for International Development have helped Latin American partners chart a new course for "Parks in Peril"

On a warm January day last year, far below the 19,000-foot peaks of the Colombian mountains known as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, down where the waters of the Don Diego River spill into the blue Caribbean Sea, the Mamas and their Younger Brothers sit together in silence.

Watching the faces of the Mamas around him, the Younger Brothers—representatives of The Nature Conservancy among them—know how improbable this scene is. The Mamas are high priests of the Kogi people, who until 1987 shunned most Younger Brothers, as they call outsiders. Sixteenth-century Spanish colonists ransacked their elaborate stone cities and enslaved their ancestors. In the past 100 years, the Kogi have watched the Younger Brothers cut 85 percent of the Sierra's forests—home to jaguar, red howler monkeys and more than 40 species found nowhere else in the world—to make way for agriculture.

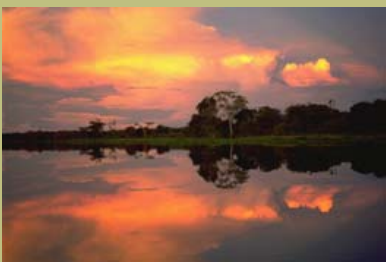
"Up to now we have ignored the Younger Brother," a Kogi Mama once explained to a British documentary filmmaker. "We have not deigned even to give him a slap. But now we can no longer look after the world alone. The Younger Brother is doing too much damage.... Now we will have to work together."

But the Mamas, with their white domed hats mimicking the peaks of the Sierra behind them, will have to be convinced to work with the Conservancy. They have concerns about a program that returns lands to indigenous ownership, an effort led by the Conservancy and its partner, Fundación Pro-Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. "The Kogi were wary of the whole idea," says Jerry Touval, who directs the Conservancy's Colombia program. "Why did we want to give them land? What did we want in return? Could we take the land away later? This meeting was my chance to reassure them about the Conservancy's motives."

The Conservancy's motives are pure conservation. Recent biological inventories and studies of satellite images indicate that returning land to the indigenous people is one of the most effective ways to restore the forests of the Sierra.



Gary Braasch
Palm, Belize



Hermes Justiniano
Noel Kempff, Bolivia



Lynda Richardson
Cacao pods, Costa Rica

"We know that lands under indigenous ownership tend to return to forest," says Touval. "We also know that some of the most biologically diverse areas of the Sierra are sites sacred to the Kogi."

Hence this meeting, rare even in the year 2000, in which the Mamas have invited Touval and his colleagues to participate in a cleansing ritual at one of their sacred sites. It is a first big step for both sides, one whose impact will affect the future of the Sierra for years to come.

TURNING PAPER INTO PROTECTION

That the indigenous lands program even exists is thanks to years of work funded by Parks in Peril, an initiative conducted by the Conservancy that has helped more than a score of nongovernmental organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean strengthen 37 parks encompassing more than 28 million acres.

The Conservancy launched Parks in Peril in 1990 as an emergency effort to safeguard imperiled ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean. Tropical forests, covering 6 percent of the Earth's surface and harboring more than half of its species, were being reduced by an area larger than a football field each second. Other ecosystems were in grave danger, from desert springs threatened by development to coral reefs depleted by destructive fishing practices. Although most Latin American and Caribbean countries had created national parks by 1990, many were parks in name only, with no clear boundaries, no staff and no protection.

Parks in Peril began with a simple idea: Provide a "lifeboat" of funding and technical assistance to local non-governmental organizations who could turn so-called paper parks into working protected areas. The Conservancy approached the U.S. Agency for International Development. USAID agreed to provide \$35 million over 10 years with another \$10 million to be contributed by the Conservancy. Over the next decade, the program paid out more than \$50 million to help transform parks into true havens for biological diversity.

"There's no doubt that Parks in Peril has been incredibly successful," says Jeff Brokaw, USAID's Environment Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean. "At the institutional level, it has helped local nongovernmental organizations become more independent and effective. At the site level, it has made parks stronger. Now you do have personnel where you didn't before. You do have infrastructure. You do have local support for conservation. Often you even have national support for conservation."

The president of Panama, for example, outlawed mining within Darien National Park—a Parks in Peril project serving as refuge for such rarities as the spectacled bear and three-toed sloth—thanks to pressure by the local conservation partner.

The details of such successes have varied as widely as the places Parks in Peril supports. In the Dominican Republic, the local conservation organization established fishing restrictions to protect the nursery grounds for conch and other marine species. In Ecuador's Podocarpus National Park, a local honey production project was so successful that producers voluntarily assessed a tax on themselves to support conservation of the area's native Andean conifers and the hundreds of bird species they harbor. And in Colombia's Sierra, the program paid for the biological research that inspired the indigenous lands program.

Indeed, Parks in Peril's wide-ranging activities defy simple definition.

"The analogy of a venture fund that gives financing and technical assistance to a start-up company isn't bad, but it misses the complexity," says Laura Cornwell, who manages USAID's involvement in Parks in Peril. "Imagine a context where each start-up operates in a different country, with different policy frameworks and varying levels of support and infrastructure. Implementing the program through local organizations and being able to adapt to local conditions are what make the Parks in Peril program successful."

Perhaps as important is the program's use of an annual scorecard, in which Conservancy staff and local partners rate their park in areas such as basic protection activities, long-term financing and conservation management. The scorecard enables the Conservancy and its local partners to decide when a park is doing well enough to no longer require Parks in Peril support.

"The scorecard was a landmark," says Cynthia Gill, acting biodiversity team leader for USAID's Global Bureau Environment Center. "It identified the critical things you needed to be working on to succeed. And it prompted the Conservancy and its partners to be creative in finding sustainable funding for these parks. That in itself is an achievement: These sites don't rely on USAID money forever."

After a decade, 20 of Parks in Peril's 37 sites have achieved just such a level of success, no longer relying on funding from the program. At least another 15 sites are expected to reach independence by the end of 2001.

To understand the difficult road a local conservation organization travels to reach that level of self-sufficiency, one need only look south to Sierra de las Minas Biosphere Reserve in the central highlands of Guatemala.

The reserve encompasses a freestanding mountain range surrounded by deep valleys and covers 584,000 acres spanning elevations from 50 to more than 9,000 feet. It includes a range of ecosystems from desertlike terrain to Central America's largest cloud forest. The reserve is home to 70 percent of Guatemala's terrestrial vertebrate species, including one of the nation's most endangered: the resplendent quetzal, Guatemala's national bird, whose iridescent feathers once graced the headdresses of Aztec and Maya rulers. In 1990 the Guatemalan government set aside Sierra de las Minas as a biological reserve—though caring for it was another matter. With no funding or park managers, the overburdened government looked to Defensores de la Naturaleza, the small nonprofit organization that had led the fight to get the reserve protected.

Defensores, with a grassroots team of seven, had its work cut out for it. Sixteen logging operations were illegally clearing swaths of forest in the reserve, the sort of threat the young Defensores had never before faced. Nor did its staff have much experience in wilderness management.

The site joined Parks in Peril in 1991, which gave Defensores's director, Andreas Lehnhoff, the means to hire and train additional people. Over time, Defensores used Parks in Peril funds to demarcate reserve boundaries, build new ranger stations, install a radio communication system, conduct a biological inventory and launch a quetzal study. The group also began outreach programs to reduce hunting and set up volunteer brigades to control forest fires.

By 1995, Defensores had grown to 85 people and was shutting down many of the logging operations. But one massive logging site remained in the heart of the quetzal's cloud forest habitat.

Then, in 1996, a handful of Guatemalan and American journalists visited the reserve under the aegis of the Rainforest Alliance Journalism Center in Costa Rica.

"We were standing in the cloud forest talking about the quetzal when suddenly one flew by in a flash of brilliant green and red and a three-foot tail plume, like a banner," recalls Diane Jukofsky, director of the journalism center. "I looked over at the Guatemalan journalists and saw they had tears in their eyes."

The stories filed in the Guatemalan press sparked a wave of public outrage against the logging.

"This was one of our biggest battles," says Lehnhoff. "The outcry in the papers added strength to Defensores's position and finally put an end to the last large-scale logging operation in the reserve."

Today Defensores oversees more than 200 people—including 150 staff members, government staff assigned to them and personnel from affiliated institutions—and manages four protected areas. As for Sierra de Las Minas, its latest scorecard confirms Defensores's success: The park is officially no longer in peril.

"That doesn't mean we've eliminated all the threats to the reserve," says Lehnhoff, who has since become director of the Guatemala program for the Conservancy. "But at least the institution is set up. Defensores has good working relationships with all the stakeholders. It has the respect of the central government. Because of that, the threats are manageable."

Guarding a Bolivian Wilderness

Besides strengthening conservation in specific parks over the past 10 years, Parks in Peril has helped to develop a powerful new generation of conservation leaders across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Consider the case of Bolivia. In 1990, Parks in Peril helped former bush pilot and photographer Hermes Justiniano turn his newly founded Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza (FAN) into co-manager of Noel Kempff Mercado National Park, then one of the most remote—and least protected—wildernesses in the world. Within the park's mix of Amazon forest, dry savannah, huge mesas and spectacular waterfalls live nearly 600 bird species, as well as large mammals declining elsewhere, such as the giant river otter and maned wolf. During Justiniano's first visit to the park in 1986, he happened upon the three guards in charge of the park's 1.8 million acres. Two wore sandals; the third was barefoot. They were responsible for an area as large as the United States' Yellowstone National Park.

From 1990 to 1994, FAN used Parks in Peril funds to equip and train park rangers, who then drastically reduced poaching, eliminated illegal logging and drove covert drug operations out of the park. FAN acquired the last private inholding in the park—the 25,000-acre Flor de Oro Ranch—and turned it into a base of operations. By 1994, Noel Kempff Mercado had been strengthened enough to leave Parks in Peril.

And the park continues to grow. In 1996, FAN, the Bolivian government, three private investors and the Conservancy announced a 30-year Climate Action Project that added 2.2 million acres to the park and retired several logging concessions inside its border. The project—designed to help stem global warming through forest conservation—provides \$9.5 million over the next 10 years to protect standing forests, regenerate cut areas and measure how much carbon would have been lost had the forests been logged, all in hopes of reducing heat-trapping carbon in the atmosphere.

“FAN now manages an area the size of Massachusetts,” says Monica Ostria, the Conservancy’s Bolivia program director. “And it has put conservation on the national agenda. Today, Bolivia’s president directly oversees a National Service of Protected Areas that operates 22 national parks, each representative of a different Bolivian ecosystem.”

The story of FAN and Noel Kempff represents the future of Parks in Peril’s efforts. “Look how FAN’s work has affected conservation in other places,” says Brad Northrup, the Conservancy vice president who oversees Parks in Peril. “Bolivian officials actively support conservation projects in their country, and they routinely advocate this kind of conservation to their colleagues in other countries.”

Given the pressures on natural areas in Latin America—scientists estimate the region is still losing 40 million acres of tropical forest per year—Parks in Peril must find ways to act more quickly. Is there a way, Northrup wonders, to affect a handful of key parks at the same time? Is there a way to ensure that the people involved in a project like Noel Kempff share their knowledge and encourage others to try similar strategies? The Conservancy currently has a proposal before USAID that outlines just such a shift in the program.

“Even so, the whole foundation of Parks in Peril will always be the work at specific sites,” says Northrup. “That’s where we get our credibility and our partners. Just look at Colombia. The Conservancy could never have just dropped into Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and been successful there. The local people are the ones who make it happen.” Indeed, the founder of the Conservancy’s Colombian partner, Juan Mayr, initiated a new era of respect for the Kogi and other indigenous groups, which he has continued to do as the country’s new minister of the environment. Jerry Touval is sure Mayr was working behind the scenes to arrange his meeting with the Mamas, which, after all, was a success. On that warm January day, Touval, his colleagues at Fundación and the Mamas returned to a small meeting room where they discussed the process of turning land over to indigenous ownership and the Conservancy’s reasons for doing so. They studied maps of the area together, tracing the overlap of biological diversity and sacred sites. Finally, the Mamas and the conservationists signed agreements and shook hands.

Since then, Fundación has secured a \$5 million World Bank loan to find economic alternatives to deforestation and a \$9 million Global Environment Facility grant to start an environmental trust fund for the entire Sierra. The indigenous lands program has returned thousands of acres to the Kogi and others, and a process of restoration—of forest, of natural beauty, perhaps even of trust—has begun.

Danielle S. Furlich is co-author of Writing for a Good Cause, published by Simon & Schuster in July 2000.

This article appeared in the Conservancy’s magazine NATURE CONSERVANCY September/October 2000 edition.

