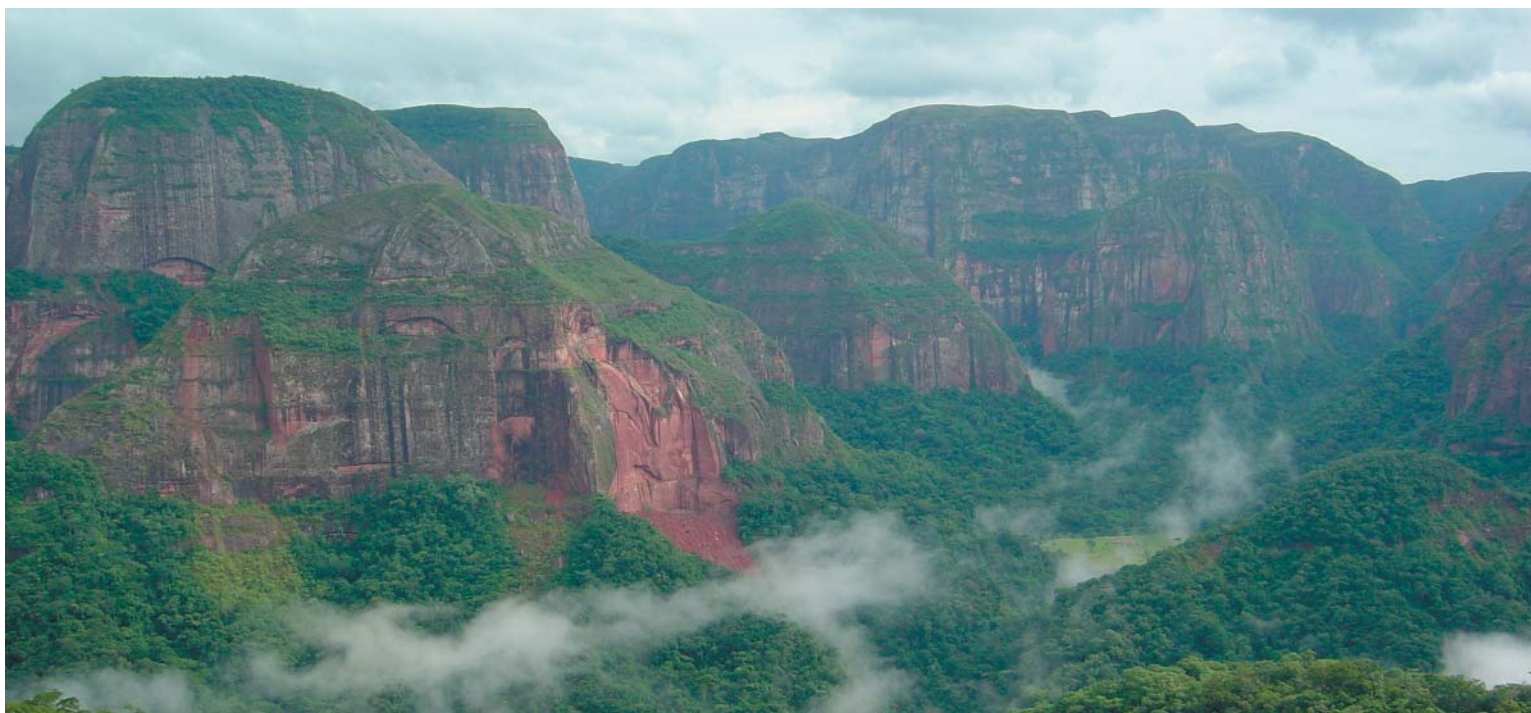


# PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS

## *Conserving South America's Natural Heritage*



Ferrous mountains in Amboró National Park, Bolivia. © Carlos Fernandez/TNC

In the United States, we take great pride in our national parks. Yellowstone, Yosemite, Great Smoky Mountains and many others are an integral part of our country's fabric and history. For more than a century, many South American nations have also taken a proud stance toward permanent protection of their natural heritage. The continent's first forest reserve was created in Uruguay in 1896, and in 1959, Ecuador's Galápagos Islands became the world's first-ever underwater marine park. Today, six of the world's 20 largest protected areas are in South America.

For over 50 years, The Nature Conservancy has relied on parks and protected areas as a key conservation tool that has been at the heart of the organization's work. Today, protected areas worldwide represent more than 12 percent of the Earth's land surface—an area greater than the entire continent of South America. Their tremendous growth in number over the past 20 years—from 28,000 to 100,000 sites—demonstrates a growing understanding of the importance of protected areas to preserving Earth's biological diversity and humankind's quality of life.

In South America, parks and protected areas are vital to species conservation. Ecuador's Condor Bioserve harbors the largest remaining population of the endangered spectacled Andean bear – the only bear species in South America. The Murici Ecological Station in Brazil's Atlantic Forest is home to more than a dozen endangered bird species and has been deemed by the American Bird Conservancy as "probably the most important place for bird conservation in the Western Hemisphere."

Protected areas are also critical to the preservation of South America's historical and cultural legacy. In Bolivia's Sama Biological Reserve, archaeologists have catalogued at least 80 archaeological sites. Protected areas are also home to indigenous peoples who can trace their roots back for millennia. Venezuela's vast Canaima National Park, which harbors pre-Colombian relics that date back 9,000 years, is also home to the indigenous Pemón people.

As of 2003, officially designated protected areas and reserves encompassed 22 percent of the South American continent. However, many such areas have



Park ranger Yuri Cid talks with Rachelle Gould of The Nature Conservancy in Laguna del Laja National Park, Chile. © Mark Godfrey/TNC

largely remained “paper parks” – legally decreed but not actually protected due to the generally limited resources of governments. Improving the management of these areas is imperative to protecting the biological diversity they harbor. Since 1990, The Nature Conservancy has partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on the Parks in Peril program throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. This partnership has allowed the Conservancy to collaborate with local communities and organizations to manage natural resources and also to develop and share innovative methods for on-the-ground conservation at more than 15 sites in six countries across South America.

### **Parks as good neighbors**

Threats to the parks and protected areas themselves not only affect wildlife, but also people living in neighboring communities. Parks play an integral part in the lives of local people. At Bolivia’s Amborró-Carrasco National Park, the nearly 20,000 people living along the park’s edges are dependent upon its watersheds for clean water. In villages surrounding Serra das Almas Reserve in Brazil’s desert-like Caatinga, communities are dependent on the reserve’s natural resources for sustainable food and wood collection. The Cachalú Biological Reserve in Colombia has a mutually beneficial relationship with communities living in its buffer zone. Nearby residents are producing shade-grown coffee that allows for forested corridors that connect the reserve with other protected areas.

### **A global vision**

The world is taking note of the important relationship between people and protected areas. In February 2004, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 188 national governments recognized the need to establish a network of protected areas to preserve Earth’s biological diversity and improve human well-being. The meeting resulted in an unprecedented Program of Action on Protected Areas to create effective national systems of protected lands and

waters tied together around the world by the year 2012, a goal that will transform global conservation.

The Conservancy, along with seven other conservation organizations, is supporting these protected areas agreements and working with the governments to establish specific targets and timetables that will lead to this significant outcome. Based on the Conservancy’s own best practices, governments agreed to strengthen existing protected areas, create new ones where appropriate, and provide the management and funding resources needed to sustain a strong, diverse system of protected areas.

### **Bringing Results to South America**

To date, the Conservancy has signed formal agreements with the governments of Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. The Conservancy has mapped ecosystems in South America that are currently unprotected, as well as identified under-protected ecosystems within existing park systems. The result is a road map that pinpoints priority areas where new parks need to be created and where existing ones are in need of shoring up. The goal is to create new parks in six of the least protected forest ecosystems in South America, representing the Conservancy’s highest priority strategy for conservation in South America, which will effectively conserve about 100 million acres over the next decade. With support from the Protected Areas agreements, the Conservancy has already developed a collaborative process for engaging the full range of stakeholders necessary for achieving success.

Today, the worldwide Program of Action on Protected Areas represents the natural progression of everything the Conservancy does. A commitment to create a global network of protected lands and waters across the Earth is intrinsically tied to the Conservancy’s core strengths, mission and long-term goals. The Conservancy has offered its conservation expertise to help these countries achieve this grand ambition. For South America, a continent where more than 80 percent of its species are found nowhere else on the planet, continuing to work in and around parks and protected areas is critical to our conservation mission.

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