



AMISTAD/BOCAS DEL TORO

*Cross-border Conservation Connects
Mountaintops to Coral Reefs*



The Conservancy and its partners are working to protect an area that extends from the Caribbean's coral reefs to the volcanic Talamanca Mountains. © David Woodfall

Explorer Christopher Columbus was so enamored with what is now Panama's Caribbean Coast that on his 1502 voyage to the New World he christened two nearby islands with his first and last names - Isla Cristóbal and Isla Colón.

Five-hundred years later, The Nature Conservancy and its partners in Costa Rica and Panama are focusing on the same area. Extending from northwestern Panama to south central Costa Rica the Amistad/Bocas del Toro region encompasses more than 2.5 million acres and eleven protected areas. From the coral reefs hidden under the waves of the Caribbean Sea to the peaks of the Talamanca mountain range, this area is home to an impressive mosaic of ecosystems that include lowland, sub-alpine paramo and flooded coastal forests; sea grasses; and red, white, black and pineapple mangroves. The West Indian manatee and caiman make their homes here, as do leatherback, green and hawksbill turtles.

With such remarkable diversity and an elevation range from sea level to 12,500 feet, it's not surprising that the area hosts 180 endemic plant species. Baird's tapirs, jaguars, ocelots, peccaries, giant anteaters, sloths, and howler, black-handled spider and white-faced capuchin monkeys are among the area's numerous mammals. Scientists have also recorded the presence of more than 375 species of birds, including harpy eagles, osprey, great green macaws, toucans, resplendent quetzals and brown boobies. Wood thrushes, prothonotary and magnolia warblers, scarlet tanagers, purple martins, Mississippi kites and Swainson's hawks are just some of the neo-tropical migratory birds that visit from North America.

A unique blend of Afro-Caribbean, BriBri, Ngöbe, Naso and Latino cultures. Most of the 93,000 inhabitants live on islands and low-lying coastal lands. Despite the region's remoteness and small human population,

many of its biological riches are in jeopardy. Overfishing, unregulated tourism, colonization, logging and clearing of land for subsistence farms, banana plantations and cattle are contributing to water pollution, sedimentation, die-off of coral reefs and the depletion of fish, lobsters, crabs and octopus. And a series of hydroelectric dams, power plants and roads planned for the area would also surely jeopardize the region's rivers and forests. To address the numerous threats the Conservancy is spearheading a cross-border and far-reaching protection plan that will link coastal marine conservation projects with those in the nearby highlands. With substantial input from local communities, the Conservancy and partners will implement strategies throughout the region, including innovative conservation finance mechanisms, fishing cooperatives and the protection of bird habitat in the lowlands and highlands.

Parks in Peril – La Amistad International Park

The Talamanca Highlands and La Amistad International Park were selected for inclusion in the Conservancy's celebrated Parks in Peril program as its first bi-national site. The goal of this four-year, USAID-funded program is to improve long-term protection, infrastructure, community integration and management for this priority site which includes a wide range of ecosystems - from unique paramo and cloud forests to colorful, tropical coral reefs and mangroves.

With funding from the Parks in Peril program and with matching support from individual donors and foundations, the Conservancy is working with local groups and government agencies to strengthen cross-boundary conservation efforts in the region. Several key initiatives and activities being pursued include the development of a bi-national management plan, the creation of conservation finance mechanisms such as water-use fees and establishment of a "Seas to Summits" corridor linking conservation projects in the upper watersheds with coastal waters. This latter initiative also seeks to protect species such as the three-wattled bellbird, the resplendent quetzal and bare-necked umbrellabird that conduct altitudinal migrations. Instead of moving laterally over vast expanses of land, these birds take a vertical route, moving from the lowlands to the highlands and vice versa to feed, mate and nest. The habitat for these animals at all stages of their life must be protected, and for this reason, the Conservancy and its partners are working on consolidating a biological corridor that will incorporate these ecosystems in the Costa Rican-Panamanian Amistad.

Marine-based Conservation in Bocas del Toro

The Nature Conservancy, with help from local communities, government agencies and private organizations recently designed a new management plan for Bastimentos National Marine Park, which was declared Panama's first marine park in 1988. However, Bastimentos covers only a small portion - 32,700 acres - of the Bocas del Toro region. To strengthen the plan's impact, the Conservancy and partners are encouraging the Panamanian government to expand the marine park's borders.

The Conservancy is also working with local communities on mechanisms to protect sea turtles, encourage ecotourism and set fishing limits on key species such as lobster. Caribbean currents carry two species of lobster from Nicaragua and Costa Rica to the Bocas del Toro archipelago in Panama. There, subsistence and commercial fishermen are overharvesting both the Caribbean spiny lobster and spotted spiny lobster. The Conservancy and the Panama-based Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) have teamed up to study these lobster populations and will also incorporate the results into a long-term, large-scale management plan for the region. With cooperation from members in Maryland, the Conservancy is also working with fishermen from 11 Ngöbe Indian communities in the region who created an organization called ADEPESCO to set catch and size limits for fish, lobsters and snails with the intention of ensuring the long-term survival of species that they depend upon for food and income.

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