

WE'RE LOOKING UNDER the rusted hood of our truck taxi, which died on a muddy summit near our destination in southern Nicaragua—the bamboo and thatch hut of Juan José Aguilar, farmer and minister. Aguilar is inside, leading the closing hymn of Bible class. High, earnest children's voices drift into the valley.

This frontier between forest and farmland is part of a park, and its director Leonal Ubau guides us, a trio of visitors. From the hill, we can see the San Juan River, which forms most of the boundary between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Below, few trees blocking the view, there is a sawmill. It has been purchased by the government and will be converted into an education center, Ubau says.

A squadron of chattering parrots, probably Red-lored, rockets overhead. Songbirds warble in the thin line of trees bordering Aguilar's pasture. We find a Yellow-throated Vireo and Black-throated Green Warbler: migrants, survivors. Are these birds going farther, or is this the southern terminus of their journey?

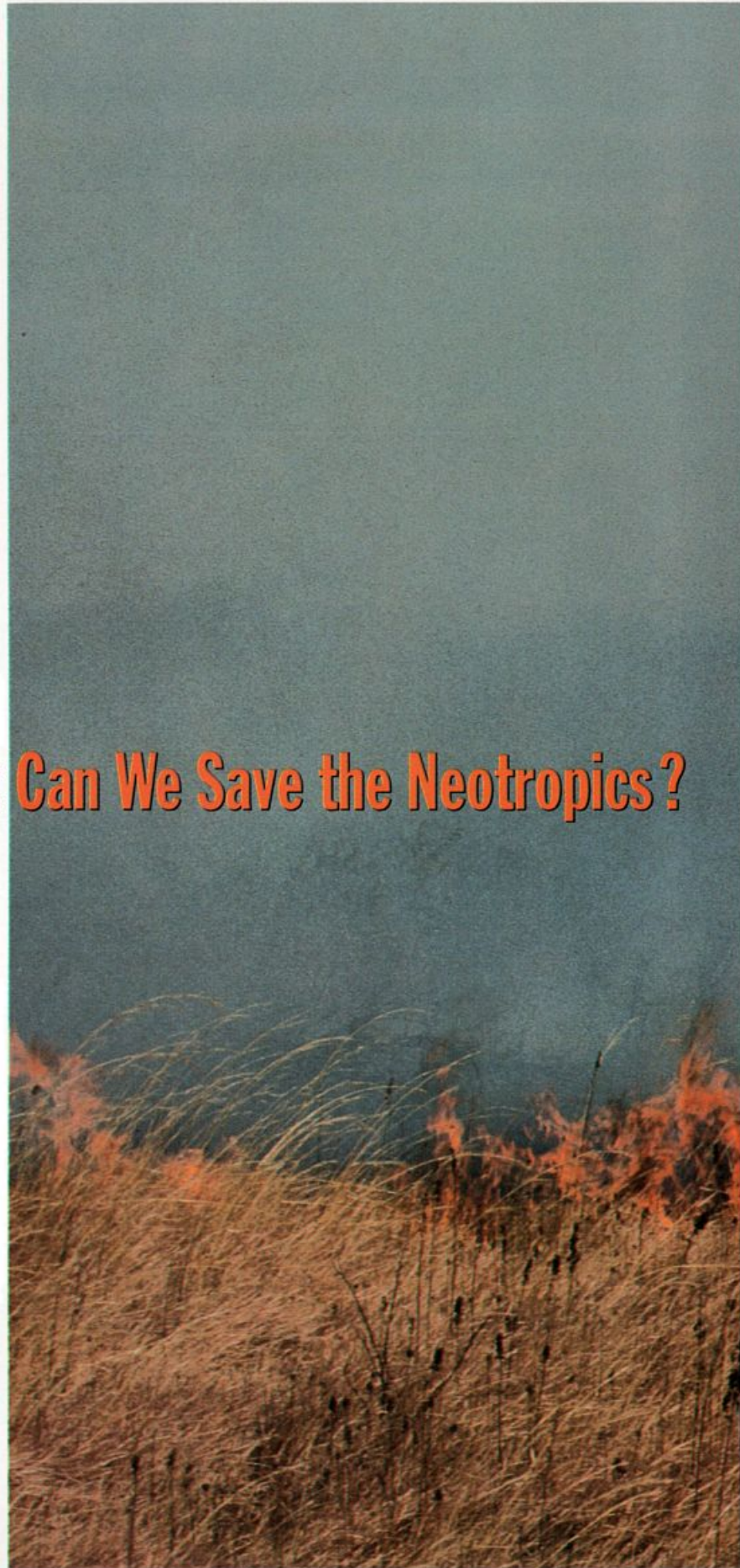
These are the Caribbean lowlands, the hot, rainy wintering grounds for many neotropical

Nature's Hothouse: Can We Save the Neotropics?

Conservationists are working hard to preserve precious habitat in Central America. But the crucial element in the battle to save migratory birds is to involve the people of the region. By Chris Wille

migrants. At a monitoring station just across the river, Costa Rican ornithologist Daniel Hernández has recorded 171 migratory species, from Reddish Egret to Hepatic Tanager. The variety is high because birds from throughout North America funnel through Mexico and into this skinny isthmus. With Central American forests under siege, what will happen to these international travelers?

From this vantage point, with choir music and bird song in the air, we can see examples of the environmental problems that plague the seven countries that make up Central America, and Mexico, which is part of North America. We can point to promising signs, too, the way





some people count their blessings in times of trouble.

The singing children and the recent clearings throughout this “protected” park remind us that population growth in Central America is on a NASA trajectory. The region, which could fit comfortably inside Texas, has 30 million people; that number is projected to double in just 25 years. Mexico, which has the largest city on Earth, is following suit.

Like Juan José Aguilar, a majority of Central Americans are shackled by poverty and locked into a day-to-day struggle to feed growing families. They are farmers by tradition, but lack fundamental agrarian skills and knowledge.

These deforested hills were the scene of bitter firefights during Nicaragua’s long revolution and counter-revolution. Now, it’s a battleground in a war that will affect the country’s future more profoundly than the ideological arm-wrestling in Managua, the capital. The outcome will determine whether the next generation of Nicaraguans inherits wildlife, water, and forest resources—or a dusty wasteland.

A worst-case scenario from the Caribbean haunts Central America’s planners: Haiti. That impoverished and politically savaged country is a textbook example of how overpopulation, mismanagement of natural resources, and avarice can combine like voodoo spirits to close all options except misery. Even if Haiti’s political problems were magically solved, the specter of ecological collapse would remain. The hordes

are gaunt, black with flies and sagging with parasites. Streams run thick and red with loads of tropical soil washed off naked slopes. With no forest to intercept the clouds and soak up rainfall, most streams are diminished, many have disappeared. During the dry season, when migratory songbirds are in the tropics, much of Central America is in flames as ranchers burn off pastures and farmers clear more forest for planting. These two forces—the dirt farmer and the cowboy—are the main agents of change south of the Río Grande. As competition for the remaining forest patches intensifies, other forces take on increased importance. These include logging, export commodity agriculture (bananas, coffee, sugar, cotton), urban sprawl, hydroelectric dams, tourism development, and tree plantations.

Understandably, these pressures make conservationists paranoid. They want to link arms around remaining forest areas to keep them safe from development. Even first-time tourists to Mexico and Central America often feel compelled to buy a piece of rainforest to “save” it.

But environmentalists learned long ago that, in the developing world, nothing is saved by declaring it a park and putting a fence around it. The pressures of growing legions of landless poor, combined with the insatiable cupidity of a few influential high-rollers, easily overwhelm the institutions in Latin America charged with managing parks. The park as an

... in 1950, three-quarters of Central America was graced with forests. Now less than 30 percent

of Haitian poor are dependent on the land, but the land has no more to give. Erosion has swept fields down to bedrock. There are no forests. People are digging up the roots of trees long gone to make charcoal.

“In Central America, we still have options, but not much time to exercise them,” says Stanley Heckadon, one of the most respected conservationists in the region. Heckadon was the first director of Panama’s natural resources agency in the post-Noriega era, and is now a one-man think tank within the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

Heckadon notes that in 1950, three-quarters of Central America was graced with forests, representing 20 life zones. Now less than 30 percent of the region is forested and that green cover is being stripped away at the rate of a million acres a year. Half the energy used in the region comes from firewood; women and children in parts of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala spend as much as four hours a day searching for wood.

And Central America recorded one of the most dramatic land-use conversions in history during the 1960s and 1970s. Huge portions of the region’s forest were burned to create pasture for cattle. In most cases not even precious hardwoods were salvaged. Ranchers denuded hill and dale, from creek bed, up vertiginous slopes to the very mountain tops.

Heckadon calculates that 65 percent of the region is now in pasture. It’s poor grass. Stocking rates are low. The cattle

inviolable preserve is a North American invention that does not translate into Spanish.

Preserves in developing nations are more similar to the Adirondacks than Yellowstone; they are vaguely defined areas often pocked with villages, farms, roads, and ranches. Certain land-use regulations are supposed to apply, but in many cases the people living there do not understand the rules or even know that, according to official maps, their corn patch is part of a park.

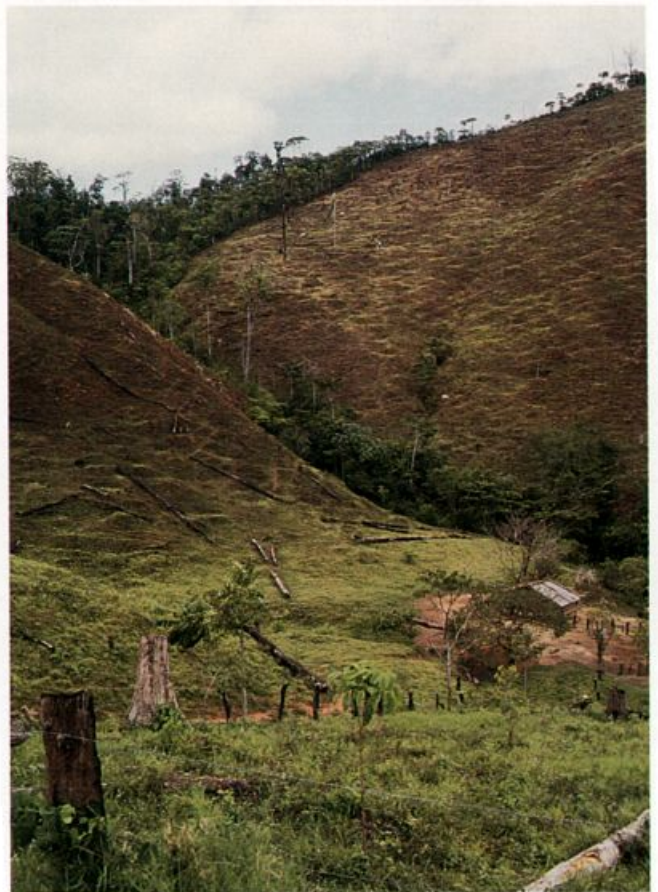
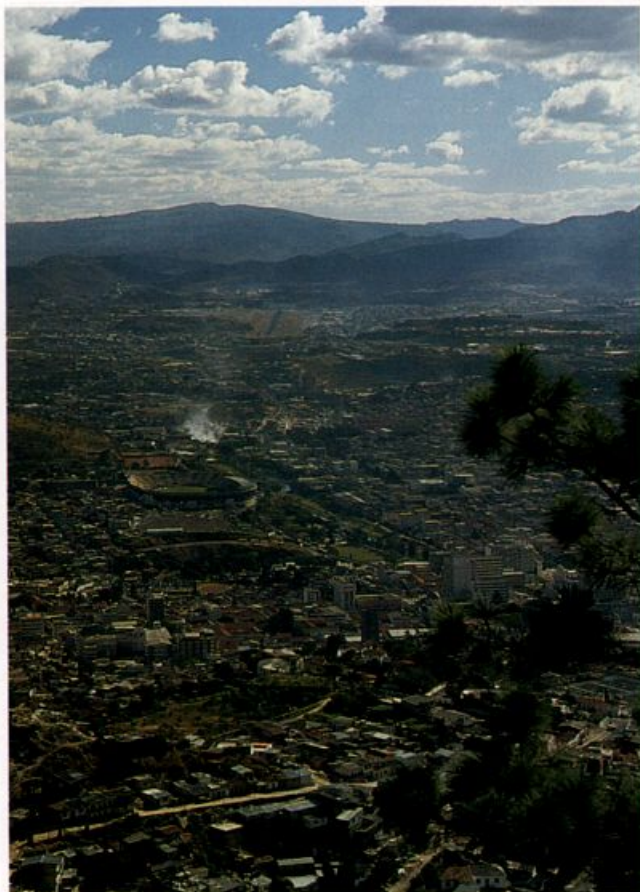
In the last two decades, Latin American governments have been on a park binge, using a broad brush to declare protected zones on their national maps. According to the World Conservation Union, which tracks the progress of parks, there were 162 protected areas in Central America at last count (1991), covering 13,338,000 acres, or the equivalent of 10 percent of the isthmus. The Mexican government claims to have 65 parks protecting almost 14 million acres, or three percent of that country’s territory. Tourism department brochures would have you believe that much more of Central America is safely tucked away in layers of visionary bureaucracy and native pride.

Costa Rica boosters, for example, claim that 20 percent of that republic is “protected for future generations.” But many

Central America faces many pressures. Top, loss of forests for pasture in Costa Rica; left, growing population in Honduras; right, farming practices devastate the soil in rural Mexico.



of the region is forested, and that is being stripped away at the rate of a million



of the region's parks exist only on paper, and none of them is really secure. Conservationists have to find ways for people and natural habitats to coexist, and that's what brings us to Si-a-Paz park on the Nicaragua/Costa Rica border.

This park has been a gleam in biologists' eyes since the early 1970s. It was officially declared Si-a-Paz ("yes to peace") in 1992—an international peace park. It runs in a thin fringe along both sides of the river to the Caribbean, where it blossoms into a glorious block of virgin rainforest on the Nicaraguan side.

The Pacific edge of Nicaragua, as well as all of Central America and most of Mexico, was denuded soon after the Spanish Conquest 500 years ago. Today—by annual applications of fire—it is kept as cattle pasture, something like burning Rembrandts to toast marshmallows. The dry, partially deciduous forest that once lined the west coast is now the most endangered tropical ecosystem.

Si-a-Paz manager Leonal Ubau and his technicians have divided southern Nicaragua into three zones. The western third, which includes Lake Nicaragua, small towns, and cowburnt deserts, is the development zone, where anything goes. The forested eastern block is designated as true park—no farming allowed. And the big middle section, 700 square miles, is a buffer zone. Juan José Aguilar and about 8500 other farmers live in the buffer zone; most of them arrived in the area during the past two years.

The hopes and efforts of Latin American conservationists are concentrated in these buffer areas; this is where people must learn to adapt to the hot and humid laws of nature.

The idea, Ubau says, is to help these immigrants break the cycle of cutting forest, farming for a few years, and then moving on when the soil is depleted.

Aguilar is enthusiastic about the results he and his eight brothers are getting on their land. He proudly shows Ubau his crop of *quiquisque*, a yam-like tuber. A neighboring field is recuperating under a cover crop of velvet beans, which enrich the soil with nitrogen. Basic food crops are growing under cacao and fruit trees.

By planting a variety of non-traditional crops and using organic farming techniques, Aguilar has converted a farm recently abandoned as worthless into a productive garden. He is an evangelist for ecologically correct farming. Noting his bumper crops, neighbors have started to pay attention.

Increased pride and improved crops are the conservationist's best tools, declares Ubau. "It is not possible to save that forest by declaring a park and putting up signs. We can save it by helping these people make better lives for themselves right here, by stabilizing this frontier."

Aerial photos of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Panama show that settlers are advancing in a rough line toward the Caribbean coast. Every year, they penetrate a few more miles into the forest, liquidating it for motley crops of corn and beans. The lush, layered growth of the rainforest conceals a

cruel irony: Many tropical soils are thin. Most of the organic matter is cycling in the forest; the rainforest wears everything that it owns.

Farmers survive by burning the forest, coaxing a few beans from the ashes, and moving on. The Maya did this for centuries—the milpa system. They would allow the land to rest and regenerate for 20 or more years. But now there are too many people with too many demands. Farmers sell their cleared land to ranchers and push again into the forest.

"Stabilizing the agricultural frontier is our greatest and most urgent challenge," says Jaime Incer, minister of natural resources in Nicaragua. The problem is especially vexing in his country, Incer says. When the Contra war ended, thousands of former combatants were suddenly left without cause or jobs. Many took their families to the frontier to hack out a living in the forest. During the war, the forests of Nicaragua and Honduras were controlled by armies. Now they are once again open to anyone with a chain saw and pioneer inclinations. It's the best Nicaragua and Honduras can do in the way of a veterans' assistance program.

Costa Rica, meanwhile, has lost its frontier. There is no more open land there. Less than five percent of El Salvador's original forest survives, and the tiny, war-ravaged republic is almost as densely populated as Haiti. Guatemala is also thickly settled. Conservationists are racing to establish buffer zones around the few wild areas in Guatemala, including the spectacular Petén region on the border with Mexico. Panama, as narrow as a hatband, still has wonderfully wild areas at either end of the country. The Pan-American Highway runs the length of the Americas, except for the famous "Darién Gap," where Panama meets Colombia. The gap is a park, home to the Kuna and other indigenous people, as well as an extraordinary array of tropical nature.

Now the governments of Colombia and Panama want to punch the highway through, which will doom the forest and eventually the indigenous tribes. This is one park battle that must be fought resolution-by-resolution in the staterooms of political power, instead of farm-by-farm in a buffer zone.

Conservation in the neotropics is close kin to community development and agriculture extension. It is seldom park or wildlife management. Environmentalists must learn to salve the wounds left by feckless governments, big business, the church, and other sectors that should be attending to socioeconomic problems. Many conservationists spend their days like Leonal Ubau in Si-a-Paz, crunching clods with dirt farmers. But it's more than simply jawboning ways to squeeze another bushel of corn out of the raw red rainforest soils.

A project called AMISCONDE in southern Costa Rica is a good illustration of the complexity of modern conservation initiatives. AMISCONDE brings business and science expertise to bear on the day-to-day problems of small communities within La Amistad, an international park joining Costa

Kuna girls in Panama live with an extraordinary array of tropical nature.



PHOTOGRAPH CHRIS WILLE

Rica and Panama. The project offers technical assistance to farmers, credit to entrepreneurs, fruit tree seedlings to those who will think of the future, empowerment through employment to women, and scholarships to budding foresters.

To pry farmers loose from their traditional, environmentally damaging and fruitless reliance on cows and coffee, AMISCONDE promotes alternatives such as the cultivation of *naranjilla*, a hearty fruit tree that grows best under the forest canopy. The market for *naranjilla*, which is used in fruit drinks, is increasing. This is a crop that can be grown without degrading the environment.

These comprehensive, multifaceted programs are usually run by consortia. AMISCONDE is managed by Clemson University's Archbold Tropical Research Center, Conservation International (based in Washington and Costa Rica), and the Tropical Science Center (based in Costa Rica). It is funded by McDonald's. Progressive, post-neocolonial groups such as Conservation International always coordinate with local organizations in host countries.

One of the most encouraging developments in the tropics is the fission growth of environmental groups, called NGOs (non-governmental organization) or PVOs (private voluntary organization) in the trade. This NGO explosion is in part due to the big-sister sponsorship by patrons such as Conservation International, Wildlife Conservation Society,

Society, reminds us that, long ago, when the land bridge between the two American continents arose, it invited the greatest exchange of biodiversity ever. Central America is still a bridge, and the exchange is still going on, but it has been badly interrupted by human activity.

Mario Boza, one of the founders of the Costa Rican park system and former vice-minister of natural resources, promotes the Mesoamerican corridor idea at every opportunity. The links in the chain, he says, can be forested private lands, ecotourism facilities, well-managed commercial forests, research stations, Indian reserves, or many other options.

When Boza or Carr hold up their maps and talk about reconnecting the Americas, people come out of their chairs. Biologists think of gene flow. Tourism operators dream of cross-border opportunities. Politicians ponder improved relations with neighbor states as governments cooperate to manage shared habitats. While *Paseo Pantera* has made tangible progress, its historical achievement may be that it animated conservationists and others to dream large and to look at borders as conduits, not obstacles.

Although the total quantity of forest cover in North America has stabilized, its value as songbird nesting habitat is declining as it is fragmented by roads, malls, and homesites. Forest cover in the tropics is disappearing at the earthshaking rate of 100 acres a minute. What tropical forest survives is

The hope is that greener farming methodology, new ideas, optimism, and awareness will radiate out

the Nature Conservancy, Rainforest Alliance, and the ubiquitous panda, World Wildlife Fund. The rising chorus of local greens is also a result of the dawning realization among nationals that they must confront eco-problems themselves.

Working together, local and international forces have established community assistance beachheads in strategic zones near wildlands throughout the neotropics. The hope is that greener farming methodology, new ideas, optimism, and awareness will radiate out from these hubs to inoculate the whole region. The worry is that these ganglia are very expensive, insatiable maws consuming eco-energy and donated dollars. Conservationists can show that ecologically sustainable agriculture and development means a better standard of living today and resources for the future. But can the good vibrations emanating from these efforts keep pace with populations doubling every two decades?

One way to increase the protection of conservation hot spots is to connect them through better communications—and this is happening through old-fashioned means such as conferences, journals, and the ever-speedier telecommunication highway. Another way is to connect them on the ground—biological corridors.

The *Paseo Pantera* (Path of the Panther) project envisions a green pathway from Mexico to Colombia so that, in theory, a cougar could traverse the isthmus. One of *Paseo Pantera's* visionaries, Archie Carr III of the Wildlife Conservation

also being fragmented, mostly by roads, pastures, and small-plot agriculture. Conservationists are frenetically trying to bridge green areas—mini *Paseo Pantera* projects.

Former National Audubon Society scientists George V. N. Powell and Robin Bjork, now with the RARE Center for Tropical Conservation, employ the corridor concept with both farmers and park planners. Most park boundaries are currently drawn along lines of political convenience that do not always consider the complicated needs of wildlife. Powell and Bjork are concerned about altitudinal migration, when birds and other animals move up and down slopes in search of seasonal food and shelter.

Using radio telemetry studies of the Resplendent Quetzal, a bird associated with montane cloud forests, the biologists proved that the fabulously plumed quetzal also needs lowland rainforest. Armed with such data, conservationists can lobby intelligently for expanded parks. They can gerrymander key pieces of habitat under umbrellas of legal protection.

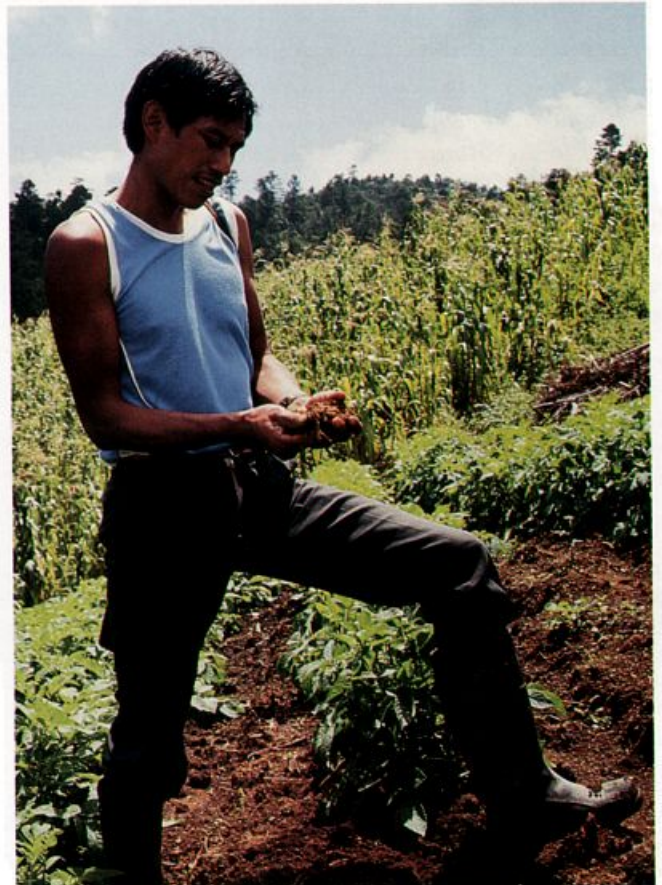
There are quetzal-chasing teams in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Mexico. The RARE program is funded in part by Partners in Flight, the songbird program of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

While projects such as *Paseo Pantera* encourage intergov-

In Nicaragua, local residents protect Lake Jocotal while using it in their everyday life. Juan José Aguilar and his yams. A Mayan farmer in Chiapas uses new maize crop techniques.



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ernmental coordination, the RARE team is face-to-face with those who have chain saws and matches in hand—the farmers and other landowners. A RARE habitat ambassador goes from farm to farm in the Monteverde region of Costa Rica, promoting the value of trees. Using computer-generated maps, he shows farmers that their land is an important link in the chain of forest patches that supports the quetzals. Like an insurance salesman, he has an endless supply of arguments to convince landholders to sign up. He talks of the personal pride warranted by hosting quetzals on one's land, the tourism dollars that these birds could bring, the value of watershed, the utility of woodlots, forests as economic security, forests for the future of their children.

This missionary work is slow, Powell admits, “but by using our telemetry data, we can zero in on those critical areas. By convincing the farmers, we can save habitat. And saving habitat is the only sure way to help birds.”

As population and production pressures intensify, conservationists know that it will be a struggle to safeguard the parks, which are already under attack. Protected by the army, illegal loggers are sacking the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Guatemala. La Tigre National Park, near Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, supplies a precious commodity to that overcrowded city—clean water. Still, the park is frayed around the edges, nibbled away by peasant farmers and the coffee plantation ambitions of the ruling class.

There are many rationales for parks, of course—watershed protection, recreation, wildlife sanctuary, clean air—but these things are difficult to quantify in ways that make sense to politicians. The benefits of ecotourism, easily measured in dollars, make a convincing case. Conservationists have hoisted ecotourism to their shoulders like a hero welcomed home.

“We know that the parks have to justify themselves, and tourism does that,” confirms Costa Rica's Mario Boza. Costa Rica has long been a favorite destination for naturalists, and in 1993 tourism surpassed bananas as the republic's leading supplier of jobs and foreign income. Every year, dozens of new “nature lodges” open in Costa Rica, advertising their natural attractions. Most of them secure a few acres of rainforest. All of them prove that nature is worth hard currency.

In Belize, conservationists are putting most of their bets on ecotourism. The tiny country still has a small population and much of its forest cover—although it has been selectively logged in the past. Belize is fringed by the world's second-largest coral reef, a magnet for divers. Because of its varied life zones and proximity to North America, Belize hosts colorful concentrations of migratory songbirds and shorebirds.

Although the population is growing rapidly—mostly by immigration from Belize's economically and politically troubled neighbors—conservationists believe that this is one place where there is still time to do it right. The Belize Audubon Society, the country's most influential green group, actually manages the parks for the government. According to BAS executive director Virginia Vásquez, the government is

considering a substantial airport entry fee for tourists, which would feed a national environmental fund. This would give Belizians a chance to put tourism to work for nature.

Conservation in the tropics barely resembles conservation in the north. It cannot rely on laws or government agencies. Despite a large department of forestry and good environmental laws in Costa Rica, for example, hillsides are shorn bare, and the rivers gurgle with sewage and agrochemicals.

There is little political lobbying. Governments and agencies are unresponsive, and in some cases just beginning to learn how a democracy should respond to citizen suggestions or protest. The Panama Audubon Society is lobbying hard to get forest along the Panama Canal designated as park. With the Panama Canal Treaty coming on line, the land, formerly controlled by the United States government, is up for grabs. The El Salvador Audubon Society gently lobbies its government for changes in land-use policies. Wildlife advocates in Honduras successfully lobbied for a presidential decree outlawing traffic in endangered parrots.

The media is a most useful tool on both sides of the Río Grande. Environmental journalism is in its infancy in Central America, but still tough enough to demand change or stop the bulldozers on the edge of a refuge. It can be risky. One Guatemalan reporter is in exile in Canada after repeated death threats and one severe beating. He was reporting on illegal logging in the Petén. Latin American governments are sensitive to critical articles in United States and Canadian newspapers, and some conservationists use that to advantage.

Environmental education, a pillar of the northern conservation movement, is spotty in the neotropics. How do you design an environmental education program to reach members of an isolated community, where there is no access to mass media, few kids in school, few people who can read, and three different dialects being spoken in a small area?

Rosa Maria Vidal, executive director of Pronatura/Chiapas, in Mexico's southern highlands, says that “Environmental education is one of our major activities, but the methodology is very different from what's used in the United States.” Education programs in the North are often judged by the quantity of pamphlets, posters, and other aids produced, Vidal says. But “those traditional materials have little value in the Maya communities where we work.”

Pronatura, Mexico's best-known green NGO, works in villages so unaccustomed to outsiders that it takes more than a year for the educators to win their trust, according to Vidal. Collaborating with a group of native artists and writers, *Sna Jtzi Bajom*, Pronatura developed ecological plays and puppet shows. The educators also record folk stories about ancestral relationships with the forest in the local Tzotzil language.

Indeed, the educators don't talk about concepts such as recycling, litter, the ozone hole, global warming, or energy

In Costa Rica, the Resplendent Quetzal migrates from cloud forest to rainforest.



conservation with the Mayans. Vidal adds, "We don't even mention birds and trees for the first year or so."

"We attend to their interests and needs first," she says. Pronatura representatives help the villagers with basic health and nutrition problems, gradually introducing concepts such as soil conservation, sustainability, and watershed protection.

The long-suffering Mayans brought world attention to their plight in January with the first truly modern, post-Cold War rebellion—minimum use of arms and derivative rhetoric, maximum deployment of thoughtful press releases.

In the Maya village of Aldama, high above the highland city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Pronatura agents Joel Escobar and John Taylor have motivated residents to start a nursery, supplying farmers with seedlings for future fruit and firewood. They have introduced organic farming techniques, cover crops, and old tricks such as planting along contours to conserve soil fertility.

Escobar and Taylor knew they had won an important ally when Domingo Jiménez, the local traditional healer, began growing organic vegetables to feed his family. Jiménez is respected for his knowledge of plants and his ability to brew up an herbal treatment for everything from fever to hangover. Now his plot of organic corn is flourishing, creating a strong incentive for his neighbors to go organic as well.

"Our mission is to help them find alternatives to their

ed to seek out the few good operators and direct consumer attention to them. During three years of study and negotiations, the Alliance established a set of guidelines for logging that would allow wood to be extracted from a forest without destroying the integrity of the ecosystem.

Wood cutters and dealers can enter the program by opening their operations to inspection by teams of foresters and ecologists. Those that pass inspection win the "Smart Wood" green seal of approval. This allows consumers to shop wisely and provides an economic incentive to the industry to operate in a way that is environmentally sensitive.

"Ecolabeling" is now seen as a powerful tool for conservationists. The Alliance has developed a similar program for banana growers. A plantation that is certified as "ECO-O.K." carefully manages pesticides, reforests along roads and rivers, protects stream systems, does not expand into neighboring rainforest, and is significantly friendly toward wildlife.

Programs to make coffee, cacao, and other crops "eco-friendly" are under way, giving the consumer increasing power to influence tropical habitats.

Back in Si-a-Paz park, Juan José Aguilar is bouncing excitedly from plot to plot, marveling to Leonal Ubau about the fecundity of it all. He yanks at a stem and the earth yields a shiny white tuber. The farmer thrusts it at Ubau: "Mira esta yami!" (Look at this yam!) But Ubau is distracted. He's been

Like most conservation groups, Pronatura joins with farmers near forest reserves to build protective

present situation," Escobar says. "Now they can only grow enough to feed their families for half the year."

This is the second agricultural revolution brought to Mexico's subsistence farmers by outsiders. The first, led by government agents and chemical companies, hooked them on agrochemicals, which generated short-term miracle crops and then misery in the form of more pests and chemically bleached soils. In any case, the poverty-strapped farmers cannot afford agrochemicals without government assistance. One goal of Pronatura's environmental education program is to help the highlanders learn to be self-sufficient.

Like most conservation groups throughout the region, Pronatura joins with farmers near forest reserves to build protective buffers of stable, successful, and content communities. This is essential work, but not enough. Conservationists must also strive to reduce the environmental impact of commercial logging and farming, because these activities affect a growing percentage of the neotropical landmass.

About eight years ago, the Rainforest Alliance, based in New York, was deluged with calls from members who wanted to boycott hardwoods from tropical forests. The Alliance studied boycott history and found that it does little to solve long-term problems. The group called together tropical foresters, wood dealers, and environmentalists from around the world and hammered out an alternative. Instead of a blanket boycott against an entire industry, the Alliance decid-

worried all day. He and his staff have not been paid for two months, and some field technicians are beginning to complain. The Nicaraguan government is in turmoil, and the United States is withholding promised aid to satisfy conservatives still obsessed with so-called subversives.

This is where all the angles come together, like a magnifying glass focusing the sun's rays. This is neotropical conservation in the '90s. Here's a proud, newly converted farmer. Here's a dedicated conservationist, still suffering political fallout. Just over the hill begins the pristine rainforest. This program, bridging both environmental and developmental concerns, is holding the line against further encroachment.

A gaggle of young Bible students skips along the dusty path, their bellies full of tortillas made from corn grown organically in contour rows laid out by environmentalists sponsored by the Danish government.

Ubau takes the vegetable from Aguilar, but his eyes are on the crown of a tree at the edge of the field. Bright spots of yellow, obviously warblers, flicker in the dense foliage. Ubau doesn't have time for bird watching. He smiles slightly, returns his attention to the ebullient farmer, and tells Aguilar that he has every right to be proud of these yams. ▶

Chris Wille is director of the Conservation Media Center for the Rainforest Alliance, based in San José, Costa Rica.

The line between forest and farm is thin in Central America. That impacts migrants like the Indigo Bunting. In Belize, ecotourism may be saving habitat.



but

light



THOMAS RAJES FOR KAWINI • CHRIS WILLE, CHRIS WILLE, ROB SIMPSON

