



Dave Sherwood | Tico Times

NEWS

Shark Campaigns Take on New Fervor

Local environmental groups are taking advantage of the release of the U.S. movie "Sharkwater" to campaign for an end to illegal shark finning.

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Study Finds More Inequality, Crime

The latest State of the Nation report indicates a strong correlation between inequality and crime, both of which increased here last year.

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BUSINESS

Banana Group Seeks to Reduce Chemical Use

The National Banana Corporation (CORBANA) has opened a research facility aimed at reducing the use of chemicals on banana plantations.

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WEEKEND

'Footprints of Heritage' Aims To Save Guanacaste's Roots

Gathering the footprints of cowboys and cooks is just one of the ways artist Karen Clachar is seeking to preserve the northwestern province's heritage in a yearlong project.

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THE NICA TIMES

Granada Rebounds

After 10 months of sluggish growth, Granada looks to rebound in the coming high season.



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A Tangled Web: Park guard Abel Castro holds up a fishing net confiscated from poachers along the Colorado River, inside Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge on the northern Caribbean coast. The refuge, the country's largest, is threatened by illegal fishing, hunting and logging, as well as squatters and agriculture encroaching from all sides.

Vast Caribbean Refuge at Risk

By Dave Sherwood

Tico Times Staff

BARRA DEL COLORADO, Limón – On any given day, Abel Castro patrols exactly one-half of Barra del Colorado National Wildlife Refuge.

His partner, Adolfo Padilla, patrols the other half.

That's 40,605 hectares (156 square miles) apiece, in a region of impenetrable jungle, bottomless swamps, winding, unmarked canals and river mouths notorious

for killing boatmen.

Their mode of transportation is a pair of locally made fiberglass pangas, one old, one new, with motors of varying condition, an always-limited supply of gas and a base camp that, until recently, didn't even have electricity.

This time of year, calbas, tasty, white-fleshed fish weighing three to five pounds, migrate into the park's rivers from the ocean in enormous numbers.

Rogue fishermen greet them with nets set illegally near the river mouths, often with

buoys that lie just below the surface, so park guards can't see them.

"It's a game of cat and mouse. They keep an eye on us. We go to one side of the park, then later find out they were in the other," Castro says with a chuckle as he rummages through a dewy pile of confiscated fishing nets outside the refuge's humble barracks near the mouth of the Colorado River.

His good humor belies the seriousness of the situation. Many believe this refuge, the country's largest at 81,000 hectares, is also its

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ICE Workers Plan Strike

By Peter Krupa

Tico Times Staff

Pay your phone bill. Buy some candles. Plan a different route for your Monday commute. The Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) is going on strike.

Unions representing the employees of the state monopoly – which controls the country's electricity, telephones, cell phones and Internet access – are calling for the walk-out to happen Monday.

They are protesting a group of laws in the Legislative Assembly that are intended to put Costa Rica in compliance with its obligations under the Central American Free-Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), a treaty the country ratified by referendum Oct. 7.

Among those laws is one that would open Costa Rica's cell phone, Internet and landline services to private competition. That's unacceptable to the ICE unions.

Fabio Chaves, president of the Association

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Ortega, Arias Meet In San José

By Gillian Gillers

Tico Times Staff

President Oscar Arias met with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega yesterday in San José to warm a frosty relationship and work toward reaching elusive agreements.

Arias said Costa Rica could forgive "an

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Nation's Largest Refuge Deemed 'Paper Park'

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most threatened.

The refuge's problems, say guards and environmental watchdogs, are numerous. Industrial agriculture, from rice plantations to bananas and pineapples, encroaches from all sides.

Squatters and an influx of illegal immigrants from across the San Juan River, along the Nicaraguan border, have settled inside refuge boundaries, cutting down once virgin forest and homesteading land without titles or rights.

Illegal fishing, hunting and logging are commonplace.

"It may be the biggest conservation failure in Costa Rica in 20 years," says Jim Barborak, a San Pedro-based biologist who heads the protected areas and conservation corridors program for Conservation International. "It's Costa Rica's 'paper park.'"

Paper Park?

The virgin palm swamps and hammocks of Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge are so vast, say rangers, many have never seen human footprints.

It is a land of superlatives, and subtleties.

There are nesting sea turtles, but no hotels. There are jaguars, but few ever see them. There are great green macaws, but no hiking trails or lookout points.

"The tourists and the turtles go to Tortuguero National Park, and that's where you'll find the park guards, and the money," says Francisco Azofeifa, an activist and ecologist who once worked for the Environment and Energy Ministry (MINA) and who now advocates for the refuge's sustainable use.

The refuge has between two and six guards on duty at any given time, depending on the season. Tortuguero, by contrast, has 20 guards, but is only one-third as large.

"There aren't enough guards to go around. We know that. During turtle season, they're all in Tortuguero. When the illegal netting begins, some shift to Barra," explains Adrian Calderón, director of MINA's regional parks' user services division.

And while the refuge may not be as charismatic as Tortuguero, with its sometimes carnival-like atmosphere, ecologically, it may be just as important or more so, say experts like Conservation International's Barborak.

"It's a critical biological corridor between Nicaragua's Indio-Maíz Reserve and Tortuguero, and a key habitat for migratory birds, fish and a host of endangered species," he says.

According to activist Azofeifa, the wildlife refuge, which spreads from the Caribbean west to the inland palm swamps, hammocks and *cerros*, or hills, is a victim of circumstance.

"It's just too big," he says.

Established in 1985, the refuge swallowed a vast chunk of territory, much of it uninhabitable, Barborak explains.

Those already inside, an estimated 3,000 or so, were allowed to stay.

It is a situation unique to wildlife refuges, said MINA's Calderón. While the country's national parks strictly prohibit settlement or resource extraction, in a refuge, sustainable fishing and farming are legal.

But Barra, he explains, has always been a land of contradictions.



Roy Arguedas Arias | Tico Times

Fading Resources

Park Guard Abel Castro holds up a candle and laughs.

"This was light until a few months ago," he said. All around the small white house that rangers use as a base camp, half-burnt candles dribbling wax line the shelves and walls.

Flashlights, notepads filled with jotted notes and dirty dishes are strewn about. A recently purchased electric hot pad serves as their frying pan and oven. Rangers spend 15 days in the park, six days out.

The biggest problem, Castro explained, is the refuge's remote, and inhabited, western end. The ranger barracks are tucked into the northeastern corner of the refuge, along the Caribbean, leaving the other end virtually unprotected.

"Sometimes, we'll get a call that there is illegal logging going on, and when we show up, all we find is an opening in the jungle and the woodchips," Castro said.

Along the San Juan River – the park's, and the country's, northern border – a recent influx of Nicaraguans is also pressuring resources.

Rangers occasionally get calls on illegal hunting near the river, but conditions are grueling.

"We step out of the boat and into waist-deep mud," Castro lamented.

Fuel is also a problem, explained Calderón, who helps administer the rangers' scant gas supply.

"In other parts of the country, rangers patrol parks on foot, or in vehicles along roads. Here we must patrol by boat. The outboard motor is the most expensive, and least economically efficient mode of travel. Gas is the limiting factor in our patrols," he said.

Sustainable Hopes

Despite the challenges, Luis Rojas, director of the enormous Tortuguero Regional



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Needle in a Haystack: Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge spans 81,000 hectares, more than 312 square miles, along the northern Caribbean coast. Scant roads, few trails and a labyrinth of rivers and canals mean the park's two guards, Abel Castro (front) and Adolfo Padilla (back right), do most of their patrols by boat.

Conservation Area (ACTO), which includes both the national park and the refuge, is optimistic.

For the first time since the refuge's creation in 1985, a management plan, delineating land uses, has been drafted.

Rojas expects it to be approved by MINA in 2008.

"This is a refuge, not a national park. People live here. We must find ways to work with them, not against them. We want to teach them sustainable farming, encourage tourism growth, help them help themselves and respect the place they live," he said.

It's not easy. Rojas acknowledges that right now any number of illegal activities could be taking place, and no one knows.

"Yes, we need more guards. But we can't continue to administer 80,000 hectares from our little corner. We need to change the way people see the refuge and its officials. We can't just be the bad guys anymore," he said.

For now, the refuge's isolation, and Mother Nature, are its most important allies.

"It's tough to destroy because it's so wet," Barborak says of the refuge, which receives an average annual rainfall of around six meters.

Inside the refuge, rangers Castro and Padilla keep up the fight.

On a quiet morning in October, before the onslaught of the illegal fishing season, light rain is falling.

Padilla boots up the barrack's recently purchased computer, one the rangers now use to catalog citations and type reports, rather than write them by hand.

He is also a photographer, he says. With fingers still encrusted with mud from outdoor work, he begins to shuffle through digital photographs of hummingbirds, monkeys, sloths and all kinds of tropical wildlife.

They're stunning.

"Look at how beautiful it is. And it's all right here, outside our door. If only we could get more people here to see it," he says. ■

Barra del Colorado: A National Gem

Race down the winding canals and expansive rivers of Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge, and the jungle passes by in a featureless blur.

Stop the motor, and it crawls with life.

Toucans glide. Monkeys howl. Manatees lumber in shallow waters. Bright colored warblers, refugees from the northern winter, flutter beneath doormat-sized leaves. Crocodiles lurk. Tarpon, known as silver kings by the fishermen who pursue them, leap and roll.

"Biologically speaking, it's every bit as important as any other protected area in the country," said Luis Rojas, who directs the region's protected areas.

GRUAS II, a recently completed mapping project that identifies key conservation areas in the country, identified it as a critical "biological corridor," between protected coastal areas to the south and Nicaragua's immense Indio-Maíz Biosphere Reserve.

The region, Rojas explains, is unique. Unlike elsewhere in Central America, there is no reef to protect

Costa Rica's northern Caribbean coast.

The forests and expansive wetlands do the job of buffering the coast instead.

Fifty-eight species of endemic plants still thrive here. Fifty kilometers of undeveloped beachfront provide nesting habitat for sea turtles.

"It's an immense storm buffer, and as climate change continues and ocean levels rise, it will become even more important," said ecologist Francisco Azofeifa.

Threatened species like the critically endangered great green macaw and the jaguar lurk in the jungles.

But because it is a "mixed" refuge, and not a national park, people also live here. Park officials estimate roughly 3,000 people live inside the boundaries, from Barra del Colorado, in the east, to Puerto Lindo further west.

"We need to find ways to work together to preserve this place," Rojas said.

—Dave Sherwood