

Carcovado National Park — monkeys, sloths, and other rainforest wildlife abound in this nature preserve. Inset: Tropical rainforests are being destroyed at an alarming rate to make room for crops and cattle. Because the soil is nutrient-poor, land destroyed for such slash-and-burn agriculture can only sustain crops for a few years.

COSTA RICA  
STRUGGLES TO  
SAVE ITS FRAGILE  
ECOSYSTEM WHILE  
EXPANDING ITS  
ECONOMY

# BALANCING ACT

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Four centuries ago, the Spanish named Costa Rica but quickly lost interest in the "rich coast" because it was void of the precious gold they sought. Today, both locals and tourists have rediscovered the country's natural resources that have marked it as one of the world's most popular ecotourism destinations. However, with tourism almost doubling annually and industrial development increasing, some fear Costa Rica's natural wonders, both above and below water, will become lost, leaving the land truly void of riches.

Burgeoning with an incredible diversity of endemic plant and animal life and a constant flow of migrating birds, the remarkable rainforests, 34 national parks, plentiful private wildlife refuges and biological reserves support more species of birds than both the U.S. and Canada combined; in addition, more species of butterflies inhabit the

country of Costa Rica than on the entire African continent. These natural riches attract a multitude of tourists each year. For instance, some parks recorded a 500 percent increase between 1989 and 1992. This influx of tourists begins to leave its mark on the country's natural habitats. The local government must sift through the dilemma of continuing to develop its tourism market while preserving the area's natural splendor.

In addition to an increase in tourists, the agricultural development of native Costa Ricans (called Ticos) has scarred the countryside. Economic development has led to clear-cutting forests for logging and farming. Farmers found that raising crops proved difficult because the thin rainforest soil could not readily support agriculture. So farmers often tried unsuccessfully to grow crops, then moved on to search

for stable land. In the process, they destroyed more and more of the natural resources.

While the boom in tourism and the agricultural development of Costa Rica have threatened many species of flora and fauna and endangered habitats, good news appears on the horizon. Moving to the forefront of conservation, Costa Ricans have taken a hard look at the value of their natural resources and have launched a strong awareness campaign. The government has also implemented new policies to protect rainforests and parks.

An Environmental Education and Ecotourism Program spreads the message of conservation to students, tourists and communities. Many groups throughout Costa Rica, starting with the country's new president, José Maria

Figuéras Olsen, preach the gospel of "sustainable development" - co-existing in harmony with conservation and "adjusting human activities to the limits imposed by nature." Elected in 1994, Figuéras campaigned on environmental issues. Although Figuéras seems to be committed to protecting major natural habitats, policies are sometimes difficult to implement. For instance, in 1994, park entrance fees for tourists were raised from \$1.25 to \$15.00 as a way to provide much-needed operating funds for the parks. However, the lack of automation in more remote areas raises the question of how much money actually has found its way into the bank.

Ginny Constance, President of Progressive Public Relations, Costa Rica specialists, hopes that the new president and tourism minister will correct excesses of the past, like the construction of the controversial Playa Tambor resort development project and the failure to prevent building within a forbidden zone along the beautiful beaches of Guanacaste. In fact, overbuilding on the whole Pacific coast of Costa Rica has damaged once-pristine bays like the Gulf of Papagayo and has endangered the turtle populations that nest along this coast. Natural disasters have also taken their toll. On the eastern shore, near Limón, a large section of the country's only coral reef died when it lifted six feet out of the water in the earthquake of 1991.

The new government is faced with several issues that present conflict between the country's economical development and its ecological preservation. For example, extending roads into areas previously inaccessible by vehicle helps the local economy and provides jobs, but it also adds to overpopulation and concomitant ecosystem problems. Until 1993, the banana industry was the number one income producer for the country. But runoff from the banana industry pollutes many rivers, killing fish and flora, which reverberates up the food chain.

Tourism, now surpassing the banana industry as the number one income producer, magnifies the dilemma for a government whose responsibili-

ty is to increase the country's economic growth while trying to save its fragile ecosystems. As Chris Baker, author of *The Costa Rica Handbook* said, "Costa Rica is well aware of the issues that are at stake in maintaining tourism growth. The current administration is moving well toward a balance, but this could be temporary if a new regime should come to power without the same commitment to the environment."

Along with the new administration's educational programs, Ticos living in and near parks and reserves are learning from private businesses by participating in the local tourism industry and preserving natural resources. Examples of the benefits abound: Tomás Pozuelo, owner of Tempress Cruises was one of the first to start training locals like Antonio at Caletas as guides. Buying supplies and support services from locals when his ship visited, Pozuelo further boosted the local economy. Other locals have found employment within tourism, further decreasing the impact of farming and fishing on a mass scale.

Cocos Island, synonymous with isolated, wild, big-animal diving, presents a typical conundrum in the tourism-versus-ecology question. Because of its distance from the mainland, only two live-aboards, *Okeanos Aggressor* (18 passengers) and *Undersea Hunter* (14 passengers) dove it from 1990 until 1995 when

they were joined by the latter's sister ship *Sea Hunter* (16 passengers) and sometimes by a special charter on *Tempress* (up to 30 passengers). You don't have to be a mathematician to figure the vast increase in divers in only six years.

Although divers are taken out in smaller skiffs and therefore, split among the numerous dive sites, there is still a large impact on the area. When I was at Cocos, three liveaboards were there for a few overlapping days. Add the sport fishing vessels and the foreign long-line fishing boats that can't seem to be controlled (see accompanying story, page 26), and you have to wonder how long it will take for Cocos Island to show significant degradation.

Diving in Costa Rica is right up there in the top echelon of "wild" dive destinations. Wild because conditions can change from dive to dive and sometimes from minute to minute — visibility varies from 20 to 80 feet, depending upon the amount of plankton or runoff. Wild because of the convulsive currents, strong surge and tall tides. Wild because waterfall-bejeweled Cocos Island, about 300 miles and 36 hours by boat from the mainland is in the line of the Humbolt current that also passes the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador and Malpelo in Columbia, bringing with it some of the biggest, wildest, waterborne animals around — schools of hammerhead and white-tipped reef sharks, giant manta rays with 10-foot wing spans, smaller mobula rays, dolphins, turtles, astonishing sailfish and the unusual red-



Clockwise: The venomous eyelash viper of the tropical rainforest grows to a maximum length of 12 inches. A hummingbird around the cloud forest reserve of Monteverde. The male spotted trunkfish is named for its hard plated body. Cocos Island is renowned for its huge gatherings of sharks. Here, reef whitetip sharks rest in a cave.

ipped batfish. Wild because you may see a humpback whale migrating from Alaska, or catch a glimpse of the largest fish in the ocean — the elusive whale shark — attracted to its favorite meal, plankton.

Costa Rica has more to offer divers than Cocos Island. Several other diving spots and ecotourist attractions abound. Plus it is so compact that it's exceedingly easy to combine vacation options that would otherwise require separate trips. In two weeks, I spent one week on a live-aboard, visited Tortuguero National Park on the northeast coast, spent a day exploring San Jose's many museums, dove the northwest Pacific coast off Guanacaste Province and experienced diving the Bat Island from the land-based resort El Ocotol.

While on the liveaboard, I dove Isla Salera, a large rocky outcropping near Mañuel Antonio. There I saw a medium-sized turtle, banded eel, plentiful puffers and parrotfish. Next, we visited Caño Island, where landlubbers hiked to the top to explore the remains of a mysterious pre-Columbian civilization that left unexplainable manmade spheres weighing up to a ton. While they investigated the ancient mystery, I explored The Arch, redolent with a variety of fish and White Tip Cave, full of white-tipped reef sharks. But my favorite dive came early the next morning when I was the only hardy passenger to show up.

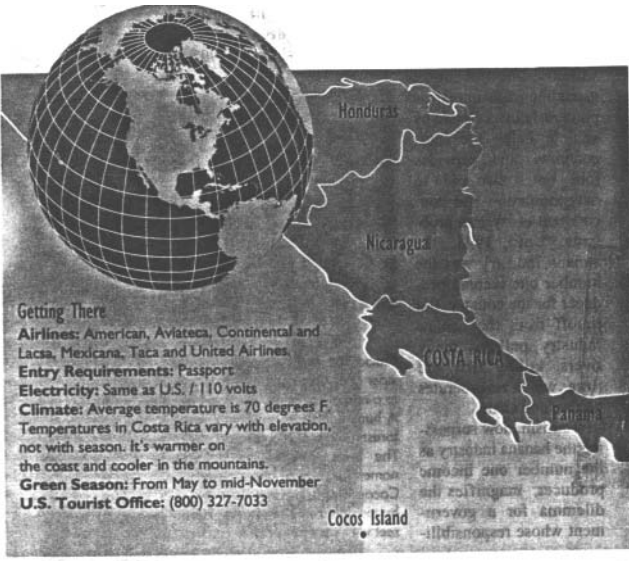
The Captain, Hugo, has a special site he calls El Bajo Del Diablo. It was difficult to find — we almost gave up — but our perseverance paid off. As we started

swimming down toward two large white-tipped reef sharks, I became distracted by a green moray eel peering out of a rock. Then suddenly the water turned dark, as if the sun had gone out. Gazing upward, I was astounded by a school of more than 100 mobula manta rays at the surface, followed shortly thereafter by an even larger school of barracuda. Later in the dive, I was swimming close to Hugo when our third buddy, Jose, pointed behind me. As I turned, there was an amorous six-foot long, 200-pound jewfish gaining ground. He kept me company for about 10 minutes before leaving to find a more responsive mate. On just one dive, I saw more than many people might see in a week of diving in many Caribbean destinations.

As I reflected on my visits to Costa Rica, it became clear that the diving — from far offshore Cocos to the near-shore sites — is some of the best in the world. However, the looming threat of mass tourism kept creeping back into my thoughts.

A country once abandoned by gold-hungry Spanish explorers is now running the risk of being overrun by literally millions of tourists, from the back-packing ecotourist to the five-star traveler. Whether it will achieve the idealistic "sustainable development" depends on striking a cordial balance between reaping the financial benefits of tourism while keeping its natural resources intact. ■

Reprinted from  
Scuba Times



**Getting There**  
**Airlines:** American, Aviateca, Continental and  
Lacsa, Mexicana, Taca and United Airlines.  
**Entry Requirements:** Passport  
**Electricity:** Same as U.S. / 110 volts  
**Climate:** Average temperature is 70 degrees F.  
Temperatures in Costa Rica vary with elevation,  
not with season. It's warmer on  
the coast and cooler in the mountains.  
**Green Season:** From May to mid-November  
**U.S. Tourist Office:** (800) 327-7033

Honduras  
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COSTA RICA  
Cocos Island