

Paradise is not yet lost

Illegal squatting and logging threaten the Biological Reserve Los Cedros in Northwestern Ecuador
by Anselm Oelze

Those who make all the way from Ecuador's grey and dirty capital Quito to the green and wet cloud forest at the [Reserva Los Cedros](#) hardly ever regret the journey once they have reached one of the most biologically diverse places on earth. Sitting on the terrace, overlooking the surrounding mountain ranges covered with innumerable trees, listening to the sound of the colourful birds or diving into the fresh water at the 'pozo de miel', the 'well of honey', makes one forget the hours spent on the shabby seats of the local bus and on the bumpy back of a mule.

But now this heavenly place in the Ecuadorian northwest, 17.000 acres of primary forest, protected since 1988 by Josef DeCoux with initial financial support from the Australian Government Aid Agency, is seriously threatened by illegal squatting and logging. Such illegal activities near the boundaries and even within the reserve have been increasing and without resolute action, Los Cedros might yet become a 'paradise lost'.

With the construction of new roads, access from the outside has become less difficult and illegal settlement is easier and more attractive than it has ever been before. Since there are no publicly or privately paid park guards patrolling the area and since local police forces are not necessarily that interested in illegal logging activities, it is increasingly difficult for Josef DeCoux and his crew to defend the reserve against the many threats.

In November 2012, John Seed from the Australian Rainforest Information Center held an online crowdfunding campaign and within a couple of weeks friends of Los Cedros, former volunteers, and scientists raised more than 6.000 dollars for funding Josef's efforts to protect the reserve. Amongst the donors was Barbara Roy, Professor of Biology at the University of Oregon, who stated that Los Cedros is the best preserved forest she has ever seen in Western Ecuador. However, money alone won't save the cloud forest reserve with its jaguars, three different species of endangered monkeys and a plethora of other rare species. In the long run what is required is a park guard programme and, most importantly, significant progress needs to be made in forestry protection in Ecuador in general.

At the moment, Josef DeCoux is diligently travelling back and forth from meetings with local authorities, officials at the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment and at the Ministry of Interior. In his opinion, these talks and their results will set new standards in Ecuador for environmental protection. Most conservation projects are facing similar problems and the Ministry of Environment has invariably lacked the capacity to supervise logging and, in a poor country like Ecuador, the police who should be carrying out operations against illegal activities are often unreliable and corrupt. There have been some signs lately that the Ministry will improve the control of all legal and illegal logging. Hopefully this will not remain a lip service.

For the future DeCoux envisions that the responsibility for the protection of the Ecuadorian forests be transferred to local governments and communities, assisted and supervised by the Ministry. From past experience he knows how crucial the local level is. Over the past decade he and others have organised several workshops to train the inhabitants of neighbouring communities in environmental skills. The resolve of the local communities to protect the area is fundamental to its survival. Even if officials in Quito decided to enhance the legislation and its implementation, it will take time and effort for this to come into effect.

Just as it is so worthwhile to make the journey from Quito over dusty roads and muddy trails into the middle of the cloud forest, it is also worth fighting for its future. There is no doubt that, in the end, everyone will profit from the conservation of Los Cedros and other reserves – the locals who earn money with eco-tourism, the biologists who gain knowledge about the eco-system, the volunteers from abroad who have work experiences they could not possibly have anywhere else, and, above all, the planet which

depends on the forests as its green lungs. However, all this supposes that the 'well of honey' does not begin to run dry.

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