

# Saving Costa Rica's Biodiversity

## Eco-tourism Protecting Costa Rica's Vital Lifeline

Plotting a course out of Central American obscurity, Costa Rica glistens like the North Star on the eco-tourism skyline. According to the Immigration Administration and the Costa Rican Tourism Board, the country welcomed over 2 million international travelers in 2014, visitors who were primarily interested in witnessing up close some of the 9,000 species of vascular plants and 200 species of mammals that call the biologically diverse environment home. Underscoring a deep and abiding dedication to protecting the country's rich landscape, Costa Rica has vowed to become carbon neutral by 2021, but even with these extensive measures, some feel the country's appeal to the nature-loving leisure traveler may someday be its undoing.



### Protecting the Rich Coast

Despite a poverty rate that has failed to fall below 20 percent in the past five years, Costa Rica, literally translated, means "rich coast". Compare it to its northern neighbor, Nicaragua, where the poverty level stubbornly holds around 40 percent, and a sense of the burgeoning economy begins to emerge.

Thanks to the soaring worldwide interest in eco-tourism, much of Costa

Rica's good fortune has been obtained through the tourist trade. In 2014 alone, revenue from tourism totaled \$2.6 billion, an 8.3 percent increase over 2013. To guard its economic mainstay, Costa Rica has created a vast network of national parks, designed to protect the plant and animal diversity of the 19,730 square miles of land from development.

Home to myriad plant and animal species, wildlife parks such as Manuel Antonio, located on the southern Pacific Coast, offer travelers a unique opportunity to glimpse native plants and animals in a natural habitat. The park ecosystem also provides a safe haven for native species.

### Manuel Antonio, Where Tourism Meets Conservation

Founded in 1972, Manuel Antonio was established to protect native wildlife against the bulldozer blade of rapidly encroaching tourist enclaves sprouting up along the winding road south from Quepos. Wildlife numbers inside the park are staggering, estimated to include four species of monkey and 200 species of birds. Although animals have adapted to the human presence within the park, the effect of the growing tourism trade has had negative fallout.



Enter the Mono Titi, or Squirrel Monkey, found only in the Costa Rica Central Pacific Region. As Manuel Antonio has grown in population, the park and its monkeys have been cut off by development from other native forests. Experts fear that the limited gene pool in and around the park will not be great enough to support future generations. Inbreeding between closely related monkeys could take its toll in deformities and death.

Food is another problem. White sand beaches roll out an alluring welcome, tempting locals and tourists alike, but Manuel Antonio's ocean paradise is home to marauding bandits. Gleefully rummaging unattended bags and stealing from the guests has become a favorite past time for Capuchin monkeys as they supplement their once native diet with unhealthy doses of packaged snacks or anything else they can steal and open.

Capitalizing further on the tourist trade, certain groups of monkeys make nightly commutes into town where open air cantinas provide an easy source of contraband food. Though it is illegal, hotels have been known to conduct happy hours, offering platters of fruit aimed at luring monkeys onto the premises for the amusement of visiting guests. The monkeys have become dependent on this food, and recent studies document a growing trend toward heart disease.



Despite the threats from the thriving tourism industry, there is good news. Knowing that much of Costa Rica's future development and success rely on tourism, the Costa Rican government has instituted some of the toughest environmental laws in the world as well as incentives for local landowners to preserve current open spaces. Forestry regulations reward local landowners who opt to restrict or prohibit clearing, allowing for tracts of undeveloped land that could act as transportation corridors or protect existing

habitats. Wildlife conservation laws and increased funding for enforcement, as well as better communication to tourists about the dangers of feeding wild animals, will all work to balance out the negative impact of tourism and development on native wildlife.

Local citizens are also making a difference. Recognizing the current crisis in and around Manuel Antonio, residents have united with concerned business owners to ensure the survival of critical species. The Titi Conservation Alliance, established in 2001, is just one of many local organizations working to promote the protection of indigenous plant and animal species from both development and the effects of tourism. Drawing on local schools and working with property owners, the organization is responsible for planting more than 35,000 native species of trees that will expand the Mono Titi habitat and provide an important source of food as populations rise.

There is no lack of respect on the part of local inhabitants for the variety of plant and animal life that make up Manuel Antonio's small portion of the country's biodiversity. As Costa Rica's eco-tourism star continues to shine, the people, combined with the government's interest, should see that the country remains a "Rich Coast" for a long time to come.