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## WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

### Area de Conservación Guanacaste (Costa Rica) – Extension to include the Santa Elena Sector, ID N° 928 Bis

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**Background note:** The IUCN technical evaluation of the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (Costa Rica) was presented to the twenty-third session of the World Heritage Committee (Morocco, 1999). Based on IUCN's advice the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List under natural criteria (ii) and (iv). The site includes 88,000 terrestrial hectares and 43,000 marine hectares, extending 12 miles into the Pacific Ocean. In its evaluation report, under Section 4 on Integrity, IUCN noted that:

*“The one major area (over 15,000 ha) still in private hands, which should be added to the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG) sometime over the next 1-2 years, is the Santa Elena Property. This contains unique geological features and a highly conserved dwarf tropical dry forest, which will add significant conservation value to ACG”.*

Furthermore in its recommendation to the World Heritage Committee IUCN recommended that:

*“Both the central government authorities and the ACG continue to intensify their efforts to incorporate the lands known as the Santa Elena Property into the ACG as soon as possible”.*

#### 1. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

By letter to the World Heritage Centre dated 19 February 2003, the State Party officially requested the inclusion of the Santa Elena Sector in the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG) World Heritage site. This follows the successful resolution of the international expropriation case (ICSID Case No. ARB/96/1) between the landowners of the Santa Elena Sector and the State of Costa Rica. In the same letter, the State Party noted that conservation and management activities have started in this sector in order to fully incorporate it in the overall management of ACG. The State Party also provided a location map of ACG showing the boundaries of the Santa Elena Sector, as well as a vegetation map and a geological map of this sector. Finally, technical information was provided on the natural values that support the extension of ACG to include the Santa Elena Sector.

#### 2. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF NOMINATED EXTENSION: SANTA ELENA SECTOR

The Santa Elena Sector (SES), of 16,000 ha, is an important part of the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG) and constitutes a major part of the Peninsula Santa Elena. Because of its location in the centre of the ACG, SES is critical to maintain the integrity of the site as it contains important areas of Pacific Tropical Dry Forest that characterize the site.

SES represents an ancient habitat that has been above the sea for 85 million years, and was an island in the eastern Pacific long before the Central American isthmus formed and connected North and South America. The SES eastern connection with the mainland is buried beneath young white volcanic materials that were deposited about a million years ago. Thus, SES is a unique geological area representing major stages of the Earth's history. This area is also exceptionally rich in plants that occur only here and are highly specialized to live on the very dry and extremely aged serpentine soils. SES contains exceptionally intact mangrove forests (containing eight species of mangroves) associated with well preserved coastal and marine areas. This leads to a unique association of wetland ecosystems and a very dry area separated by only 10 meters. Most of the vertebrate species occurring in ACG are also found in SES.

Punta Respingue, of approximately 75 ha and located in the coastal area of SES, is the only freshwater wetland on the entire Pacific coast of Costa Rica, formed by eroded alluvial soil washed down from the slopes behind. It forms a soggy swamp in the rainy season with open water in the centre. The flat is held in place by a distinctive steep, fragile, and raised cobble beach that is the barrier against the high waves that roll in off the open Pacific throughout the rainy season. The very strong south-westerly dry season winds in January-March push these waves back out to sea. These winds have created the highest and thickest sand dunes to be observed along the Guanacaste coast. The dunes are in pristine condition and demonstrate clearly the interaction between the coastal forest and the shifting sand system.

### **3. RECOMMENDATION**

IUCN recommends the World Heritage Committee **to extend** the Area de Conservación Guanacaste to include the Santa Elena Sector as part of the natural World Heritage site. Thus, the total area of the Area de Conservación Guanacaste would be 147,000 ha, comprising 104,000 ha of terrestrial area and 43,000 ha of marine area.

The World Heritage Committee may also wish to commend the State Party for its commitment and efforts in solving the legal process concerning the inclusion of this important sector in the Area de Conservation Guanacaste and encourages the State Party to fully integrate this sector in the overall management of this World Heritage site.