

Conservation Status of The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve: A World Heritage Site in Danger

Mission Report for UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee



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1. Objectives of the Mission

The principal objective of the mission was to determine the current status of management and protection of the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site, and in particular to gauge progress in implementing recommendations of a previous site assessment mission carried out by IUCN for UNESCO in 1995, which led to placement of the site on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger. The government of Honduras invited the mission by letter on 21 June 2000.

2. Background

The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR), created in 1980 and expanded to approximately 800,000 ha in size in 1997, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1982 under natural criteria (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv).

National and international concern about inadequate protection of the site led to formal discussion of threats to the site at the 19th and 20th session of the World Heritage Committee. In November 1995, based on a request from the Environment Secretariat of Honduras (now the Secretariat for Environment and Natural Resources), technical assistance was requested via the Natural Heritage Unit of UNESCO, to determine the status of conservation and protection of the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. Following on this request, UNESCO asked the World Conservation Union (IUCN), which provides technical backstopping to UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention, to carry out an evaluation mission of the RPBR.

The report prepared by the 1995 mission mentions, in a chapter on urgent action measures, ten recommendations for the Honduran government, to correct a series of deficiencies and threats that seriously the integrity of the RPBR at that time. In addition to the series of recommendations for the Honduran government, the report recommended to UNESCO the inclusion of the RPBR on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger, as a means of harnessing the technical and financial support needed to implement the ten urgent recommendations mentioned above. The Ministry of the Environment of Honduras endorsed the mission report.

To follow up on the 1995 mission, based on terms of reference and mission objectives proposed by UNESCO, a new evaluation mission was planned for late 2000, and was carried out by James R. Barborak, protected areas specialist of the Wildlife Conservation Society, who is a member of the World Protected Areas Commission of IUCN and who was designated by the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO, and by Alberto Salas, Regional Coordinator of the Forest and Protected Areas Conservation Program of the Mesoamerican Office of IUCN (ORMA).

The mission was carried out between October 23 and 31, 2000, and consisted of interviews and meetings with representatives of government agency central headquarters and field offices, international support organizations, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), leaders of local indigenous and peasant communities, and individuals directly involved in management and conservation of the RPBR. See table 2 for a list of individuals contacted. Of particular importance was the strong support provided by the agency directly responsible for reserve management, which is the State Forest Administration/Honduran Forestry Development Corporation (AFE-COHDEFOR).

The evaluation team also reviewed available relevant documentation on the RPBR (see bibliography) and carried out field visits to the site. In the southern part of the RBRP Alberto Salas visited Dulce Nombre de Culmi, San Pedro de Pisijire, la Colonia (which is the sub-regional administrative headquarters for AFE/COHDEFOR), Las Marias, La Llorona, Plan Grande, Sawason and Sawacito. All of these communities are within the southern buffer zone of the RBRP. In the coastal zone and Sico River watershed along the north and west side of the reserve, Jim Barborak visited Palacios, Sico, Champas, and Limoncito. These communities are located in the cultural and influence zones of the RBRP, and Barborak also traveled by mule into remote squatter settlements of the western buffer zone of the reserve.

After initial meetings, the field visits, and review of documentation, the team prepared a draft report, which was discussed and analyzed together with central office staff of the Protected Areas and Wildlife Department of AFE/COHDEFOR, the local and international staff of the German-funded Rio Platano project, and field staff of the biosphere reserve, which functions as an autonomous forest management district of AFE/COHDEFOR.

On the final day of the mission, AFE/COHDEFOR convened an inter-institutional meeting to which a number of government agencies and national and international organizations involved in management and conservation of the RBRP were invited. At that meeting, the consultants provided an overview of the objectives, methods, and results of their mission and participants provided additional feedback regarding the draft report and recommendations of the team that were incorporated in the final report of the mission. See table 3 for a list of participants.

3. Current situation of the RBRP and status of implementation of the recommendations of the 1995 mission

Following is a table which attempts to provide a concise overview of the achievements of the Honduran government and cooperating organizations in improving effectiveness and efficiency of RBRP management and in particular, of implementing recommendations of the 1995 mission:

No.	Description of 1995 Mission Recommendation	Implementation Status as of 11/00	Level of Implementation
1	Formation of interinstitutional commission to formulate an action plan	First phase action plan for protection of the RBRP published 7/00	Plan developed and partially implemented
2	Registry of land ownership and occupation in cultural, buffer and influence zones	Census carried out 1997-1998 but no land registry	Census completed; registry not yet begun
3	Demarcation and posting of limits, particularly in critical areas and development of a communications program to stir public opinion about threats to the area	Detailed proposals are included in the 7/00 action plan	Planned for near-term implementation
4	Establish control posts with public security officials in critical zones and achieve agreements with groups living in these areas	Three major control posts and special control operations carried out; more needed	Partial implementation and plans for additional posts in near future
5	Study of alternatives for relocating families in critical areas of the core zone	Strategy for relocation finished in September 2000	Strategy done and implementation set for 2001/2002
6	Establish an appropriate administrative structure for RPBR and integrate inter-institutional efforts through a management plan	National and regional protected area councils recently authorized by regulation but not functional; six local management councils established	Local councils functioning but not regional and national councils; forest management district now operational, needs strengthening
7	Carry out an environmental audit and assessment of development activities planned for the Sico-Paulaya Valleys	The Agricultural Secretariat has authorized bidding on EIA in a 40,000 ha area	EIA planned, bidding soon to occur; not yet implemented
8	Prepare a management plan for the RBRP including appropriate zoning	Plan published in September 2000; formal approval and distribution soon to occur; macro-zoning left unchanged; micro-level zoning within cultural, buffer zones completed	Plan finished through participatory process; approval process underway by COHDEFOR council; national launch of plan and wide distribution still has not occurred
9	Promote and facilitate the organization of communities in the RBRP to ensure institutional presence at low cost; co-management arrangements to be determined through working groups	Six local communities for each involved municipality; co-management and land use agreements with some coops and communities	Local management councils in place; co-management and land use agreements partially implemented in some communities; role of NGOs and universities in co-management still unclear
10	Support sustainable land use through preparation of master plan and regulations, with specific subprograms, putting emphasis on ecotourism	Macro-zoning in master plans keeps pre-existing definitions of core, buffer, cultural, and influence zones; detailed participatory zoning for all but core zone; management program implementation underway	Plan and detailed zoning finished; implementation partial and incipient; levels of tourism program development and numbers of tourists extremely low

4. Principal Limitations

There are a number of limitations and constraints on improved management and protection of the RBRP, summarized below:

- The large size of the reserve (over 800,000 ha excluding the influence zone) makes protection and adequate control and administration costly and extremely challenging.
- The limited basic ecological information available on species, populations, and communities of flora and fauna and their habitats, on the physical characteristics of the area, and on land use capability and potential environmental impacts of current and planned development activities, makes good stewardship and design of suitable sustainable development activities difficult.
- The lack of respect for existing laws by certain special interest groups and individuals (poaching of timber and game, squatting and resale of government land, etc.) threatens conservation efforts.
- The infrastructure, equipment, operating budget, and management structure of the Rio Platano Forest Region of AFE-COHDEFOR are still inadequate, even if greatly improved in the past three years. There are still insufficient technical personnel and rangers and they lack adequate experience and training in protected area management and suffer from low government salaries.
- The continued immigration of mestizo colonists to the western influence zone and the cultural and buffer zones of the reserve causes grave damage to the fragile ecosystems of the area, as does the high birthrate among current residents.
- Land use practices in use by reserve inhabitants and neighbors are unsustainable and incompatible with the land use capability of these areas and cause grave environmental damage.
- Limited infrastructure and basic social services in the towns and municipalities around the reserve (for example, limited tourism, transportation, and marketing infrastructure) reduce options for sustainable economic development.
- Inadequate long-term financial and technical resources available from national and local governments and local and international support agencies limit the implementation of reserve management and development programs.

- The high level of poverty of the population and the lack of an range of economic alternatives, particularly in the Cultural Zone, contribute to the overuse of reserve resources.
- The high level of population growth and intensifying pressure on natural resources is contributing to increasing threats to natural resources.
- Extension and outreach programs are incipient and don't adequately contribute to resolving the problems mentioned above.
- Current legal and policy instruments and fiscal measures do not adequate contribute to providing a good mix of incentives to promote sustainable activities and disincentives to eliminate destructive ones.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 General Conclusions

The government of Honduras, working with strong support from local communities, national and international NGOs, and bilateral assistance agencies, has made great strides in implementing a number of the ten major recommendations of the evaluation mission sent by IUCN and UNESCO in 1995. That mission led to inclusion of the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve (RBRP) on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Among notable accomplishments are the following:

- Completion of a participatory management and zoning plan
- Establishment of a growing on-the-ground management presence
- Establishment of interagency control posts in strategic points
- Preparation/initial implementation of an inter-institutional action plan
- Organization of agro-forestry cooperatives

In addition, there are plans, projects, and funding in place to proceed with implementation of the remaining recommendations of the 1995 mission by the end of 2003. This is possible in large part due to the generous support of the Federal Republic of Germany and other bilateral donors and international NGOs, and thanks to the political and financial commitment of the government of Honduras and the assistance of local municipalities, communities, and NGOs.

While great strides have been made in implementing some of the ten major recommendations of the 1995 evaluation mission, severe threats and problems remain. Major problems include the following:

- The rate of deforestation within the buffer zone of the RBRP is even higher than the national deforestation rate
- The population of the RBRP buffer and cultural zones continues to increase at nearly 4 percent per year, a rate higher than the national growth rate, which is one of the highest in the Western Hemisphere
- The relocation of over 100 families that have illegally invaded the core zone of the reserve has not begun and core zone limits are unmarked
- Development of research, outreach, and ecotourism programs and infrastructure has barely begun
- The proposed rural development and land titling project for inhabitants of the Sico-Paulaya Valleys in the RBRP influence zone, and required impact assessments, have not yet gotten underway
- There is no permanent funding mechanism for reserve operations
- The regional management council is still not operational and inter-institutional coordination and cooperation are deficient
- Problems such as illegal logging, poaching, and archaeological looting, though reduced through increased management presence, still occur at unacceptable levels

The resolution of these threats will require continued political support and energetic action by the Honduran government and collaborating local and international agencies. It will also require greater environmental awareness and commitment by the communities that inhabit the RBRP and its zone of influence, if management and protection of this World Heritage Site is to improve to acceptable international standards.

5.2 General Recommendations for the World Heritage Committee and UNESCO

- a) Commend the government of Honduras, local communities and municipalities, national and international NGOs, and bilateral donors for the progress achieved over the past three years in improving protection and management of the RBRP.
- b) Maintain the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve on the List of World Heritage in Danger until 2003, but ask the Honduran government to send yearly updates to the annual meeting of the Committee on progress in implementing pending recommendations of the 1995 mission and those of the 2000 mission
- c) Send a follow-up mission in the second semester of 2003 to review progress made in acting on recommendations of the 1995 and 2000 missions, and to again analyze the possibility of removing the RBRP from the list of World Heritage in Danger

- d) Consider the possibility of expanding both direct support through the World Heritage Fund, and supporting requests to other UN bodies and the UN Foundation, to provide increased technical and financial assistance for management of the RBRP. Particular emphasis should go towards supporting those management programs that still are extremely weak, including environmental education, research, public use/ecotourism, and coastal and marine management.
- e) Take a leadership role in mobilizing the donor community to assist the Honduran government in creation of a permanent endowment to cover recurrent protection and management costs for the reserve, and in strengthening an existing fund for community development around the reserve.

5.3 Recommendations for the Honduran Government Regarding the RBRP

- a) Continue efforts to implement those recommendations of the 1995 evaluation mission which have still not been fully implemented, particularly the following:
 - Finish the land tenure survey of the buffer and influence zones
 - Mark and sign critical segments of the core zone limit
 - Establish remaining proposed control posts
 - Resettle all families from core zone to influence zone
 - Establish a regional management committee
 - Carry out impact studies of Sico-Paulaya valley development plans
 - Do a national presentation and information campaign on the master plan
 - Continue to promote community organizations and cooperatives
 - Expand local land use planning and community co-management initiatives
 - Promote increase ecotourism opportunities in the RBRP
- b) Establish a permanent endowment fund for basic recurrent protection and management costs for the RBRP, and strengthen the existing “Biosphere Fund” established by WWF, MOPAWI and World Neighbors and seek government participation in its governing board (but not government control)
- c) Give increased emphasis to gender issues in all government activities within the RBRP and influence zone and support reproductive health education programs aimed at eliminating unsustainable human population growth rates within and around the RBRP
- d) Strengthen those management programs of the RBRP that have received less attention to date, particularly for ecotourism, environmental education, research, and marine and coastal resource management.

- e) Implement the land titling and rural development project for the Sico-Paulaya Valley and establish the permanent presence of the Ministry of Agriculture (SAG) and Agrarian Institute (INA) in the valley.
- f) Continue preparing detailed land use plans at the community, micro-watershed, and cooperative level and giving land use concessions and co-management authority to agroforestry cooperatives, producer groups and indigenous communities in the buffer, cultural, and influence zones
- g) Finish establishment of a network of control posts in key access and transit points in the buffer, cultural and influence zones; expand the planned control post network to temporary posts at strategic seasonal access points to the core zone; and create a permanent mechanism for community-level enforcement to augment the ranger corps
- h) Nominate the Bacalar, Brus, and Ibans Lagoons and adjacent wetlands and coastal waters as a Ramsar Site and seek technical and financial cooperation from the Ramsar Secretariat/IUCN.
- i) Develop and implement an institutional strategy to improve and maintain open lines of communication and interagency coordination among AFE/COHDEFOR as the principal management agency, other Honduran central government agencies, local municipalities, local NGOs and communities, and the donor community and scientists.
- j) Disseminate this report and the 1995 evaluation to all organizations involved in management and protection of the RBRP

5.4 General Recommendations to the Honduran Government Regarding Strengthening Conservation Programs in Eastern Honduras and the Binational Mosquitia Region

- a) Continue the process of establishing reserves to conserve remaining unprotected wildlands in eastern Honduras that form critical links in the Honduran portion of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor and that serve as important buffers and additional layers of protection for the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve. These include the Sierra del Rio Tinto, Montaña del Carbon, Caratasca and other coastal lagoons of the Mosquitia; Sierra La Esperanza, Montaña del Malacate, Sierra de Warunta, and Rio Kruta. This process should obviously be in full consultation with neighboring communities, in accordance with Honduran protected area laws and regulations, and in a step-wise manner based on available resources and manpower so as to not create “paper parks.”

- b) Continue to strengthen management of the newly created Tawahka Reserve and Patuca National Park that adjoin the RPBR, and consider inclusion of these areas within an expanded Mosquitia Biosphere Reserve that also includes the RPBR.
- c) Strengthen protection management of Agalta National Park and the threatened corridors linking this area with the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve and the Sierra del Rio Tinto.
- d) Follow up on the existing bilateral agreements with Nicaragua regarding coordinated protection and management and landscape-level planning for border wildlands in the Mosquitia Region, stretching from the Cayos Miskitos and Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in northeastern Nicaragua to the Rio Platano.

Annex I: Selected Bibliography

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La Gaceta – República de Honduras. 1997. Decreto No. 170-97

Table 2: Persons Contacted During the Consultancy		
Name	Organization	Place
Steven Gretzinger	WWF - Centroamérica	Tegucigalpa
Oswaldo Munguía	MOPAWI	Tegucigalpa
Adalberto Padilla	MOPAWI	Tegucigalpa
Karen Luz	TNC	Tegucigalpa
Pedro Müller	BRP, GFA, GTZ	Tegucigalpa
Jochen Leitz	BRP, GFA, GTZ	Tegucigalpa
José Luis Corrales	BRP, GFA, GTZ	Tegucigalpa
Rosman Márquez	BRP, GFA, GTZ	Tegucigalpa
Gloria Zelaya	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Tegucigalpa
Victor Archaga	AFE/COHDEFOR	Tegucigalpa
Rudy Talavera	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Tegucigalpa
Erik Nielsen	University of Idaho	Tegucigalpa
Juan Blas Zapata	Agenda Forestal Hundureña	Tegucigalpa
Marcel Giudicelli	Fundación Río Plátano	Tegucigalpa
Raúl Munguía	Fundación Río Plátano	La Colonia
José Varela	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	La Colonia
Estela Cárdenas	BRP, GFA, GTZ	La Colonia
Leslie Yesenia	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	La Colonia
César Sánchez	CATIE-TRANSFORMA	La Colonia
Egberto Chamales	COBOZ, La Colonia	La Colonia
Rudy (last name unknown)	Cooperativa Río Plátano	Las Marías
Mónico González	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Plan Grande
Lisethe Bendeck	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Plan Grande
Gullermo Bu Castellón	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Plan Grande
José Luis Rivera	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Sawacito
Gamal González	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Sawacito
Isidro Güiti	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Sawacito
Diana Figueroa	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Sawacito
Carlos Breve	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Sawacito
Marlene Soto	Cooperativa Sawacito	Sawacito
Jorge Betancourt	U.S. Peace Corps	Tegucigalpa
Luis Corrales	AFE/COHDEFOR	Palacios
Peter Hearne	USAID	Tegucigalpa
Rosman Marquez	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Palacios
Sergio Herrera	WWF	Tegucigalpa
Alexis Sanchez	BRP, AFE/COHDEFOR	Tegucigalpa
Jorge Salaverri	Private Ecotourism Entrepreneur	La Ceiba
Gustavo Cruz	UNAH-National University	Tegucigalpa
Carlos Witte	Bayan Association	Palacios
Donaldo Allen	Bayan Association	Palacios
Claudia Matute	Bayan Association	Palacios
Renan Valdes	National Agrarian Institute	Palacios
Eblin Tejeda	National Agrarian Institute	Palacios
Delmar Gonzalez	National Agrarian Institute	Palacios
Javier D. Rodriguez	RPBR	Palacios
German Oliva	Copen Agroforestry Coop	Champas
Fausto Rosales	Copen Agroforestry Coop	Champas
Jose Barahona	Copen Agroforestry Coop	Champas
Orlando Barahona	Copen Agroforestry Coop	Champas
Jose Romero	Copen Agroforestry Coop	Champas
Misael Recinos	MOPAWI	Palacios
Martin Herrera	MOPAWI	Palacios
Marco Tulio Lopez	AFE/COHDEFOR DAPVS	Tegucigalpa

Table 3: Participants in Interinstitutional Meeting with Mission Team to Review Preliminary Findings, October 31, 2000	
Name	Organization
Miguel Alvarado Rivera	AFE/COHDEFOR
Gunter Simon	PSF/GTZ
Eduardo Canales	AFE/COHDEFOR—PROBAP/GEF
Marco Tulio Lopez	AFE/COHDEFOR DAPVS
Beatriz Coello	UNESCO
Luis Corrales	AFE/COHDEFOR RPBR
Gisela Alcantara M.	Asociacion Bayan (local NGO)
Rosman Marquez	AFE/COHDEFOR RPBR
Gloria Zelaya	AFE/COHDEFOR RPBR
Sergio Herrera	World Wildlife Fund
Oswaldo Munguia	MOPAWI (local NGO)
Elvia Zaldivar	AFE/COHDEFOR RPBR
Leonel Rivera	National Agrarian Institute (INA)
Rudy Talavera M.	AFE/COHDEFOR RPBR
Marcelo Giudicelli P.	Fundacion Rio Platano
Victor Leonel Archaga R.	AFE/COHDEFOR DAPVS
Jochen Leitz	RPBR—German Technical Assistance
Pedro Muller	RPBR—German Technical Assistance
Carlos Roberto Paz	SERNA (Environment Ministry)