

**WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN SUMMARY**  
**LOS KATÍOS NATURAL NATIONAL PARK (COLOMBIA)**

Summary prepared by IUCN/WCMC (March 1994) based on the original nomination submitted by the Government of Colombia. This original and all documents presented in support of this nomination will be available for consultation at the meetings of the Bureau and the Committee.

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**1. LOCATION**

Los Katíos is located in NW Colombia in the north of the Department of Chocó between the frontier with Panama and the west bank of the Río Atrato. It includes the swamps of Tumarado to the east of this river and land between the Cacarica, Perancho and Peyé rivers. Los Katíos forms a transfrontier protected area with Panama's Darién National Park and World Heritage Site.

**2. JURIDICAL DATA**

Los Katíos was created as a national park in 1974, and it was extended from its original 52,000ha to its present size of 72,000ha in 1980.

**3. IDENTIFICATION**

The park comprises two main regions, each accounting for about half of the park's area: the mountains of the Serranía del Darién in the west and the floodplain of the Atrato river in the east. The main ecosystems are swamp forests in the lowlands and tropical rain forests on the higher ground and the hills. The ground rises from about 50m in the south-east to a maximum of 600m in the hills of the north west. The park is extremely diverse with a large number of vertebrate and plant species. It contains many species which are typically Central American and found nowhere else in South America, as well as many species endemic to the Darién region.

**4. STATE OF PRESERVATION/CONSERVATION**

Los Katíos is one of the best preserved of Colombia's protected areas, mainly as a result of the acquisition of private land within the park and the large amount of funding received through the ICA-USDA agreement and the GEF funded Biopacific Program. The park extends the area protected by the adjacent Darién National Park in Panama is the largest and one of the most important protected areas in Central America.

**5. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST**

The nomination, as presented by the Government of Colombia, provides the following justification for designation as a World Heritage natural property:

- (ii) **Outstanding example representing significant ongoing biological processes.** Los Katíos played a major role in the biogeographical history of the Americas, a role which continues today. Its geographical location in northern Colombia made it a filter or barrier to the interchange of fauna between the Americas during the Tertiary and Pleistocene. It is

thought to be the site of a Pleistocene refuge, a hypothesis supported by the high proportion of endemic plants.

- (iii) **Contains unique, rare or superlative natural phenomena, formations or features of exceptional natural beauty** The park contains the spectacular waterfalls of Tendal (20m) and Tilupo (100m) and the extensive wetlands of the Ciénaga de Tumaradó.
- (iv) **Contains the most important and significant natural habitats for threatened species** The park is home to 450 species of bird, some 25% and 50% respectively of the avifaunas of Colombia and Panama. In addition, 550 vertebrate species (excluding fish) have been recorded, a figure equivalent to 20% of Colombia's vertebrate fauna. Los Katíos is unique in South America for the large number of typically Central American species found in the park. It is the only protected area in this region of Colombia and is therefore the last refuge for many species which would otherwise become extinct. The park is also home to several threatened animals. Some 20-25% of plant species are endemic to the park.



# WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

## LOS KATIOS NATURAL NATIONAL PARK (COLOMBIA)

(Extension to Darien National Park, Panama)

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### 1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) IUCN / WCMC Data Sheet (Eight references)
- ii) Additional Literature Consulted: Republic of Colombia. 1993. Conservacion de la Biodiversidad del Choco. Project Biopacifico. GEF. 135 p.; INDERENA. 1989. Los Katios Management Plan. 3 volumes; US Dept. Transport. 1974. Final E.I.A. Darien Gap Highway; Rep. of Cal. 1991. Carretera del Tapon del Darien. XVI Congress Panamericano de Carreteras. 102 p.
- iii) Consultations: Four external reviewers; INDERENA officials.
- iv) Field Visit: Jim Thorsell. December 1993.

### 2. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Los Katios and its adjoining sister park, Darien in Panama, represent the only major protected area at the point of contact between the Middle American land-bridge and the South American continent. As such, it is a singularly unique conservation unit in terms of location. Also, because the highlands of the Darien were a pleistocene refuge, a particularly rich biota is found here with elements from both continents. Indeed, the Choco biogeographic region where the park is located is the most species rich forest in the tropical Americas and is considered a center of endemism for both flora and fauna. The only other site that matches it in size and diversity is the Amistad World Heritage site shared by Panama and Costa Rica (790,000 ha). This area is more a mountainous site as compared to the Darien/Katios area which contains low hills, lowland forest and wetland.

There are eight other parks in Colombia's Choco region, all of which are extremely important with high conservation value, particularly Farallones, Paramillo and Utria. Los Katios is the only one in the Darien gap, however, and is set apart from the others as it has a combination of forest and wetlands.

In sum, Los Katios is unique in its own right and is an integral part of the Darien region, a major part of which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981.

### 3. INTEGRITY

The natural condition of Los Katios was compromised in the first 70 years of this century by a sugar cane and cattle ranch that occupied some 5% of its current area. This operation was abandoned and the people relocated. The affected area is now regenerating. The rest of the park has never been cultivated although there has been some removal of timber and some small scale settlement before the Cuna indians moved to the Panamanian side in the 19th century.

Today Los Katios is one of the best preserved parks in Colombia partially due to a US Department of Agriculture project to keep the area free from transmission of domestic stock diseases. The park also receives support from the GEF as part of Colombia's National Biopacifico Project. The park has an up-to-date management plan and coordinates regularly with authorities on the Panamanian side. There is some civil disturbance in the region and some illegal narcotic growing but neither of these has significantly affected the park. There is commercial fishing and heavy boat traffic on the Atrato River which bisects the park but this does not affect the terrestrial parts of the park.

The two main threats to the park are the increasing deforestation and settlement of the region surrounding Darien and the proposal to construct a highway through the Darien Gap. One possible route that this road would take through Los Katios and through the Darien is known and would be very damaging to the integrity of the region especially as adequate impact studies have not been done. There are no current plans to begin construction of this road but it is a possible eventuality. A Resolution on the issue passed at the 1994 IUCN General Assembly is included as an annex to this evaluation.

#### 4. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The Panama and Colombian governments have a cooperative agreement on the management of the two adjacent parks and are preparing a new management plan. Both have also informally agreed that for purposes of the World Heritage List the site be considered a binational one with the name Darien/Los Katios National Parks (Panama/Colombia).

#### 5. EVALUATION

The addition of Los Katios to the existing Darien National Park and World Heritage site will have several important benefits. First it will add substantial wetland values that are found only on the Colombian side. It will increase the size of the binational site to 651,000 ha - a 12 percent increase. As a transfrontier site it will also foster continued cooperation between both governments.

Due to its location in the Central American land bridge the Darien/Los Katios site has acted as a filter for the interchange of fauna between the two Americas during the Tertiary and Pleistocene and it is still the only area in South America where large numbers of Central American taxa are found. Los Katios also displays exceptional biodiversity and provides habitat to a number of threatened animal and endemic plant species. Like its sister park, Los Katios thus meets two natural criteria (*ii* and *iv*) and satisfies all conditions of integrity.

#### 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Los Katios should be added to the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria *ii* and *iv* and it should be inscribed as a transfrontier site with Panama's Darien National Park. The Committee should commend both Governments for the bilateral cooperative management agreements that will assist in ensuring the integrity of the site. The Committee may also wish to endorse, in principle, IUCN Resolution 19.66 (attached) dealing with the proposal for a road through the area.



J. Thorsell

## 19.66            **Opening of the Tapón del Darién**

CONSIDERING that no current, adequate environmental impact studies have yet been undertaken for the opening of the Tapón del Darién;

AWARE that the invaluable biological, ecological, cultural, economic, medicinal and other resources of the forest area known as Darién have been recognized in a World Heritage Site, a biosphere reserve and a national park;

CONCERNED that the management and protection of natural resources in the Darién have not yet provided adequately for the management of biological diversity and maintenance of the ecological integrity of the area;

CONSIDERING that the unique indigenous people of Darién and Chocó would suffer an immediate and severe impact from the opening of the Tapón del Darién;

RECOGNIZING that the proposed opening of the Darién-Chocó road with inadequate planning and preparation to counter its negative effects will affect not only Panama and Colombia, but also the other Latin-American countries and the world;

CONCERNED that the processes of colonization and environmental destruction caused by the construction of roads in nearby areas of Panama and Colombia have already been demonstrated to be of such magnitude that they invariably aggravate local marginalization and poverty in the short term;

CONSIDERING that it is a priority for humankind to guarantee the conservation of the Darién natural areas, given their unique biodiversity and the vital processes that take place in them, as well as their role in ultimately maintaining life on earth;

The General Assembly of IUCN - The World Conservation Union, at its 19th Session in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 17-26 January 1994:

1.        **ENDORSES** fully the position of those organizations that are opposed to the opening of the Tapón del Darién;
2.        **REQUESTS** all IUCN members to adopt this call and to act in solidarity against the construction of the proposed road;
3.        **FURTHER REQUESTS** them to support the appeal to those governments and financial agencies involved, to carry out a detailed public study on environmental impact with the cooperation of national and international non-governmental organizations and other governmental and academic bodies. Such a study should objectively evaluate the feasibility (from various perspectives-cultural, social, technical, ecological, economic, etc.) of implementing such a road-building project. It should consider alternatives to the construction of the road, and in the event of opting for it, should specify all the required prevention and mitigation standards and measures so as to reduce the negative impact of this project in all its phases of development (planning, marking out, building, operation, maintenance, *inter alia*). The study should present a thorough account of the commitments that governments, financial agencies, building and licensing companies, where applicable, and other organizations involved, have to make in order to enforce all suggested standards of prevention and mitigation. It should also propose the follow-up mechanisms and procedures of these commitments in full so as to guarantee that all sectors of society participate in them;

4. **REQUESTS** the Director General, within available resources:
- (a) to request the Governments and financial agencies concerned to reconsider the construction of a road through the Tapón del Darién;
  - (b) to work with IUCN National Committees in Panama and Colombia to organize a public forum in which the controversial road-building project through the Tapón de Darién would be discussed and analyzed, thereby allowing both the participation of the international community and supporting the transparency of the consultation on the project;
  - (c) to work with IUCN National Committees in Panama and Colombia to study alternatives to the proposed road, including an open-skies policy and ferry service between Caribbean and Pacific ports of both Panama and Colombia.

Note. This Recommendation was adopted by consensus. The delegations of the State members Norway and Oman indicated that had there been a vote, they would have abstained.