



Next Steps towards the Removal of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve from the List of World Heritage in Danger

**Tailoring the Approach to the
Evolving Local Context**

**Technical Report documenting an
Independent Advisory Mission**

Tilman Jaeger, November 2017

**In Cooperation with the *Instituto Nacional de Conservación y Desarrollo
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Cover photo (author):

Meanders and oxbow lakes near the Río Plátano river mouth

Disclaimer

The author is a member of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), but acting in an independent capacity under contract by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Notwithstanding, any views expressed are neither the views of UNESCO nor IUCN and shall not be represented as such.

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1. Background, Objectives and Structure

Despite profound challenges Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve continues to be a Meso-American conservation gem of global importance. As recently as in February of 2017, scientists from Zamorano University, the National Autonomous University of Honduras, Conservation International and other institutions conducted a rapid biodiversity assessment in a remote part of the core zone of the biosphere reserve. In the words of the expedition leader “the richness of species was overwhelming - indicative of the large area of unexplored, intact forest we found ourselves in” (Larsen, 2017). The preliminary results of the survey are impressive. For example, a snake species believed to be extinct in Honduras could be documented, along with an unknown salamander species and several species of butterflies, amphibians and bats never before recorded in Honduras.

The World Heritage property includes sizeable tracts of one of the largest remaining blocks of intact humid broadleaf forest in Central America. This contiguous block of closed forest is situated in the mountainous middle and upper reaches of the Río Plátano. The dense forests transition into an extraordinary landscape mosaic towards the Caribbean Coast. The coastal plains boast lagoons, mangroves, open pine forests, vast wetlands and savannas. Spectacular archeological findings in the recent past are a reminder of an ancient Pre-Columbian human history. From a nature conservation perspective, the more recent human dimension of the property has been dominated by:

- (i) strong impacts and threats from illicit activities; and
- (ii) significant efforts to come to terms with conflicts surrounding access to natural resources by indigenous peoples and local communities.

A World Heritage property since 1982, Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was first inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger from 1996 to 2007 and for a second time in 2011 to the present. It deserves to be recalled that the Government of Honduras explicitly endorsed the more recent “danger listing” in exemplary recognition of the severity of the challenges. In its capacity as a State Party to the World Heritage Convention, the Government of Honduras has since been considerably investing in its management response, supported by non-governmental organizations and cooperation projects.

The assignment documented in this report builds upon earlier cooperation in 2015 (International Assistance 2741 under the World Heritage Fund). While the earlier cooperation helped establish a preliminary foundation for future steps, the situation on the ground has since been evolving, motivating the Government of Honduras to re-assess its options. Upon request by the State Party, the World Heritage Centre facilitated further independent advice. As the earlier cooperation, this assignment had the objective to support the Government of Honduras on its path towards the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger. The role of the author was to serve as a resource person, facilitate discussions and propose concrete courses of action to the Minister, ICF leadership and the project team to underpin informed decision-making.

In preparation, a desktop review of all formal World Heritage documentation since 2015 was conducted and informal discussions were held with colleagues at ICF, UNESCO and IUCN. An advisory mission took place from 16 to 21 October 2017, providing an opportunity to discuss the latest developments and their implications in depth and in person. Specifically, the discussions centered on:

- (i) the concrete implications of the widely agreed necessity to elaborate and submit a so-called Significant Boundary Modification, which by definition amounts to a new World Heritage nomination;
- (ii) the refining of a preliminary Desired state of conservation for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR); and
- (iii) the need to update the Tentative List as a formal consequence of the envisaged new nomination.

The report documenting the assignment in 2015 described the many changes in the Honduran Mosquitia region since the World Heritage inscription in 1982 in more detail. Readers are invited to consider the 2015 report in conjunction with this report. Direct reference to the first report centers on a brief recapitulation of the main conclusions and recommendations at the beginning of chapter 2. For ease of reference, Annex 2 provides the full text of the conclusions and recommendations offered in the first report.

In essence, this report provides an updated situation analysis and offers refined follow-up options to the State Party in light of new information and recent developments in the Honduran Mosquitia. Following this introductory section, a brief recapitulation of the first report sets the stage for the updated findings. The findings in turn are the foundation of updated and refined recommendations. Finally, the annexes provide readers with additional information, including draft elements of the envisaged updates of the DSCOR (Annex 4) and the Honduran Tentative List (Annex 5).

2. Findings

2.1 Recapitulation of earlier Conclusions and Recommendations

Both the boundaries and the zonation of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, as legally defined at the national level, were fundamentally changed by a decree dated 1997 (Decreto No. 170-97, 16 October 1997). Among other changes, the protected area roughly doubled its surface area at the time. It is important to understand that, consequently, the boundaries and zones according to which Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1982, legally ceased to exist some 20 years ago.

The governmental decision to fundamentally change the configuration of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve at the national level in 1997 was a plausible response to land use changes, threats, opportunities and shifting conservation thinking. Previously forested land literally run over by an advancing agricultural frontier in the south and southwest of the protected area was converted into a buffer zone; the core zone was enlarged to the east in order to encompass most of the contiguous block of closed humid broadleaf forest; the designation of a vast and innovative “cultural zone” of approx. 425,000 ha to finally address the previously neglected presence, rights and livelihood needs of resource-dependent indigenous peoples and local communities.

In other words, Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was fundamentally revised at the national level in 1997, adapting the protected area to both the reality on the ground and policy changes. With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been highly desirable to harmonize this major revision of the country’s largest protected area with the configuration of the World Heritage approach at the same time. The lack of revising the World Heritage configuration in line with the changed national legal framework to this day has been resulting in the unhelpful co-existence of two very distinct “generations” of Río Plátano

Biosphere Reserve since 1997. Despite fundamental differences in scale, configuration and approach both bear the same name. This has been compromising the discussion about the boundaries, zones and the very conservation approach ever since. The dual international designation as both a biosphere reserve designated under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) and a World Heritage property also seems to have generated misunderstandings.

Upon full realization that Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, as legally defined at the national level, has long grown out of its formally inscribed World Heritage boundaries, a consensus on the need for a major revision of the World Heritage configuration emerged in 2015. Such a harmonization with a changed legal framework and the reality on the ground can be regarded as a belated adaptation of the World Heritage property to changes made in Honduras two decades ago for very good reasons.

It is clear and widely accepted that is not desirable and not even possible to re-create a spatial approach applied in 1982, an approach long recognized as untenable at the national level. This implies that the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger cannot follow the logic of attempting to re-establish the situation at the time of inscription. Rather, the decisive question is how Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve can be re-thought and re-established as a legitimate World Heritage property today, meeting all corresponding requirements. Inevitably, a future World Heritage property will have a substantially different configuration compared to the one inscribed in 1982. If one accepts this reasoning, the inevitable procedural consequence is a so-called Significant Boundary Modification. A Significant Boundary Modification in turn amounts to a new World Heritage nomination by definition (see paragraph 164 of the Operational Guidelines, hereafter OG). Therefore, the task ahead of the State Party is to work towards the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger by way of a new World Heritage nomination. There are two procedural implications:

- (i) the Desired state of Conservation for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR) must be updated and linked to the new nomination effort;
- (ii) The State Party of Honduras is to update its Tentative List (TL) in order to be in the formal position to submit a new nomination.

While the challenges leading to the inscription of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve on the List of World Heritage in Danger are of course not restricted to the definition of boundaries and zones, there can be little doubt that unambiguous boundaries and zones of the World Heritage property are required as a foundation of any efforts to improve its governance, management and conservation and measure performance in this regard.

2.2 New Developments and Options

The preliminary conclusion agreed in 2015 was that the Significant Boundary Modification (i.e. new World Heritage nomination) should draw upon the existing configuration of the much larger biosphere reserve to the degree possible. At the time, there was agreement that the entire core zone of the biosphere reserve should be an integral element of a new nomination. It is important to recall in this context that the core zone of the biosphere reserve is only partially located inside the formally inscribed World Heritage property despite its extraordinary importance and strict protection status. There was also agreement on the adequacy of the existing buffer zone in the west and west of the biosphere reserve in response to the pressure of the agricultural frontier.

However, the discussion about the cultural zone could not be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in 2015. The scenario favored by many in 2015, including the author, was to nominate only a part of the cultural zone along with the core zone of the biosphere reserve. The assumption was that some areas within the cultural zone were worthy of World Heritage status, whereas others were not. It was recommended that areas not deemed worthy of World Heritage become part of an enlarged buffer zone. While this approach continues to be plausible per se, it raises difficult questions. For example, what exact yardstick should be applied to distinguish areas worthy of World Heritage status within the cultural zone from areas to become part of an enlarged future buffer zone? Would it be helpful to divide up the cultural zone when years of sensitive negotiations with indigenous peoples could just be concluded in this very zone? Could such a proposal be perceived as an imposition, compromising fragile trust? Any real or perceived division of the cultural zone would also add further complexity and “new lines on the map”, contradicting the spirit of harmonization of the World Heritage approach with the promising zonation which has been evolving over time and which was recently consolidated. For these reasons, the advisory mission revealed skepticism about the scenario identified as the best way forward in 2015.

The Honduran colleagues reported on a number of positive developments in Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, which in their views might pave the way for a more ambitious option to re-think and re-establish Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve as a World Heritage property. The main developments since 2015, as reported during the advisory mission, are summarized hereafter:

- Representatives of the Ministry, ICF, the Armed Forces and the Public Prosecutor’s Office reported an improved security situation in the Honduran Mosquitia in line with media reports. High-profile arrests have raised cautious optimism that lawlessness and impunity can be addressed more effectively;
- The titling process in the cultural zone of the biosphere reserve could be brought to a conclusion. In April 2016, 18 titles totaling some 390,000 hectares were officially handed over to Indigenous Territorial Councils of the Miskitu and Pech, an unprecedented recognition of ancestral rights of historical importance. Reportedly, this process has not only enhanced clarity in terms of indigenous rights, but also considerably improved the relationship between governmental actors, indigenous peoples and local communities;
- Cooperation agreements (Convenios de Cooperación) could be concluded with Pech, Miskito and Garífuna; ICF now has cooperation agreements with all indigenous peoples in the vast cultural zone;
- Two local “Life Plans” (Planes de Vida) could be concluded in the cultural zone with others being elaborated;
- Ongoing archeological excavations have been yielding spectacular results, re-fueling a discussion about a possible mixed World Heritage approach, i.e. an approach according to both cultural and natural criteria;
- The ongoing archeological excavations also raise questions in terms of possible impacts. The need for coordination was confirmed by the leadership of the governmental institutions in charge of protected areas and archeological heritage, respectively;
- The rapid biodiversity assessment conducted in February 2017 confirmed that poorly known parts of the core zone of the biosphere reserve located outside of

the World Heritage property continue to be in an exceptionally intact state of conservation.

The significant progress made in the cultural zone the biosphere reserve nourishes the idea that the current configuration of the biosphere reserve might offer an adequate spatial framework for a future World Heritage property. The open discussions thereby revealed both a confirmation of earlier conclusions and a need to partially re-consider the 2015 recommendations:

- In line with the thinking in 2015, the usefulness of integrating the entire core zone of the biosphere reserve into a reconfigured World Heritage approach was re-affirmed and considered feasible. The conservation significance of the entire core zone is undisputed, its strict protection status is unambiguous and its management by and large effective. Furthermore, the results of the recent rapid assessment suggest an excellent state of conservation of the biosphere reserve core zone outside the inscribed property. Therefore, there is no logical reason to only consider part of it as an integral part of the World Heritage approach;
- Likewise, the earlier consensus on the adequacy of the existing buffer zone of the biosphere reserve as a shield against the agricultural frontier in the west and south was re-affirmed. The buffer zone of the biosphere reserve would be fully consistent with World Heritage expectations. It was noted that the biosphere reserve lacked a buffer zone elsewhere. This is because the human pressure is not comparable elsewhere. The State Party has the option to explain this situation in a possible new nomination in line with paragraph 106 of the Operational Guidelines, which reads as follows: "Where no buffer zone is proposed, the nomination should include a statement as to why a buffer zone is not required." If further analysis reveals a need for additional buffer zones elsewhere, this could be addressed in the nomination process;
- The most notable deviation from the 2015 recommendations referred to the cultural zone. It was argued that the conservation values and integrity of the entire cultural zone might meet World Heritage requirements, taking into account that sustainable use was not per se incompatible with World Heritage status according to paragraph 119 of the Operational Guidelines. The idea also gave rise the idea of a possible mixed approach in recognition of the indigenous dimension of the cultural zone, including the consideration as a cultural landscape;
- The open discussions also yielded a completely new scenario. The nomination of the entire core zone of the biosphere reserve - some 210,000 ha of closed broadleaf forest - might deserve World Heritage status on its own;
- Finally, the significant archeological discoveries re-opened earlier debates about a possible mixed World Heritage approach according to both natural and cultural World Heritage criteria, the latter focusing on the archeological heritage. It deserves to be recalled that the existing property was initially nominated according to both natural and cultural World Heritage criteria, but eventually inscribed as a natural World Heritage property.

The implications of the above summary can be distilled to three possible scenarios, whereas the way forward recommended in 2015 was discarded. These scenarios are summarized and briefly examined in the table hereafter.

Scenario 1: Core Zone of the Biosphere Reserve only

Nominating the entire, strictly protected core zone of the biosphere reserve would result in a nomination of some 210,000 ha of an exceptionally valuable forest block, of which currently only some 120,000 ha are inscribed. The buffer and the cultural zone of the biosphere reserve would jointly constitute an enlarged and vast buffer zone of more than 600,000 ha.

Pros	Cons	Conclusion and Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exceptional forest block widely recognized as one of the areas of highest conservation importance within the Mesoamerica biodiversity hotspot; - plausible approach to harmonize the biosphere reserve approach and a revised natural World Heritage property; - comparatively straightforward; full clarity in terms of configuration, legal framework, category and management objectives; - opportunity to add a layer of World Heritage recognition in line with the management approach at the national level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The nominated area would not comply with the two main arguments justifying the original inscription of the existing property (coverage of an entire river and an exceptionally diverse landscape mosaic); - exclusion of the human dimension which has been dominating the policy, governance and management for at least two decades; - considerable reduction in size, a questionable strategy for the removal of a property from the List of World Heritage in Danger; - added complexity by inclusion of an area of active archeological excavation. 	<p>An exclusive focus on the core zone is thinkable in principle, as it can be argued that a new nomination does not necessarily have to follow the logic of the initial inscription as long as it complies with World Heritage requirements. Undoubtedly, the 210,000 ha core zone is of international importance on its own. Nevertheless, this approach would be a radical and questionable departure from the efforts to address the challenges, which resulted in the inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger. On balance, reducing the surface area of an inscribed World Heritage property, while excluding the most threatened areas, conveys an unfortunate message. If successful, this strategy would set a most problematic precedent, possibly motivating other State Parties to seemingly solve conservation problems by excluding critical areas. This is certainly not in the spirit of the Convention, which after all has the objective to identify and protect areas of highest conservation importance. Scenario 1 is therefore not recommended, regardless of its possible feasibility.</p>

Scenario 2: Combing the Core Zone and the Cultural Zone of the Biosphere Reserve

The nomination of the entire core zone proposed in Scenario 1 could be combined with the vast cultural zone of the biosphere reserve resulting in a nominated area of some 630,000 ha with an additional buffer zone of approximately 200,000 ha.

Pros	Cons	Conclusion and Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Much larger overall surface area, roughly doubling the size of the existing World Heritage property; - compliance with key justifications of original inscription, while strongly increasing the diversity of the landscape mosaic within the World 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Added complexity at a time of inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger; - added complexity due to the need for indigenous consent in the buffer zone; - possible question marks in terms of integrity in the cultural zone; 	<p>In terms of just the core zone of the biosphere reserve, this scenario comes with all pros and cons of Scenario 1. The addition of the cultural zone increases the complexity, but also the attractiveness of Scenario 2. Despite ongoing challenges the biosphere reserve approach actively pursued by the government, non-governmental actors, as well as bi-lateral and multi-lateral external supporters is a promising response to the local setting. While the landmark formalization of rights of indigenous peoples and communities of African descent is not a cure-all, it increases the likelihood of</p>

Heritage configuration;
 - in line with the legal, policy, governance and management framework at the national level since 1997;
 - full harmonization with the national and international biosphere reserve;
 - opportunity to link the innovative cooperation with indigenous peoples and local communities of African descent with the World Heritage approach.

- strong threats to parts of the cultural zone.

preventing external actors to illegally convert the native landscape or otherwise exploit natural resources. It is highly attractive to harmonize the World Heritage approach with the existing frameworks at the national level and at the level of the internationally designated biosphere reserve. Otherwise, it is not possible to take full advantage of the added value of the additional layer of protection, visibility and accountability that comes with World Heritage status. Overall, Scenario 2 is recommended as a demanding, yet credible and proactive strategy to revise the World Heritage approach in a way that does not avoid the multiple challenges, which have resulted in the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger. It is clear that the challenge goes far beyond a spatial reconfiguration. A new nomination will have to demonstrate compliance with all World Heritage requirements.

Scenario 3: Embarking on a Mixed World Heritage Approach

In line with the nomination in 1981, a mixed approach could be based on the rich archeological heritage of the Mosquitia coinciding with the extraordinary natural values. In principle, a mixed approach could also be based on the living cultures of the indigenous peoples in the cultural zone, alternative or complementary to the archeological dimension.

Pros	Cons	Conclusion and Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of the remarkable overlap of a rich archeological heritage overlapping with areas of highest nature conservation value; - promising World Heritage precedents in Latin America and elsewhere; - a possible mixed nomination in recognition of the indigenous and Afrohonduran cultures in the cultural zone would be an innovative use of the World Heritage Convention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Added complexity at a time of inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger; - limited archeological documentation, knowledge and information at this point in time; - risk of attracting undesired levels of attention to vulnerable archeological heritage; - failure to successfully nominate could be perceived as a rejection of the importance of the indigenous cultures. 	<p>In line with the majority of colleagues consulted during the advisory mission, the author is confident that the possible World Heritage merits of the archeological heritage within the biosphere reserve deserve in-depth analysis. The assessment of such merits is beyond the mandate and capacity of the author. While any World Heritage approach in the Honduran Mosquitia should fully recognize and address the cultural dimension, a mixed approach to reflect the indigenous and Afrohonduran cultures in the cultural zone is a risky strategy, which could well be counterproductive in case of failure. Given this risk and the still modest understanding of the archeological heritage of the area and the existing complexity due to the ongoing inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger it is difficult to see any major benefits of embarking on a mixed nomination at this point in time.</p>

2.3 Harmonizing the Biosphere Reserve and the World Heritage Property

As noted, the name of the property is identical to the name of the much larger protected area legally defined at the national level. The name of the property is also identical to the name of the biosphere reserve designated internationally under the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme. It is not uncommon for biosphere reserves and World Heritage properties to fully or partially overlap. Unfortunately, it is also not uncommon that multiple designations can cause a certain amount of misunderstandings and misperceptions, especially when the boundaries and zonation of the various designations do not coincide and/or differ from the legal boundaries at the national level. The author was made aware of communication between the Government of Honduras and the governing body of the MAB Programme (International Co-coordinating Council, MAB-ICC) regarding the configuration of the internationally designated biosphere reserve in parallel to the ongoing discussion about the configuration of the World Heritage property.

It is important to recall in this context that MAB-ICC adopted an exit strategy in 2013 “to improve the credibility and the quality of the WNBR and help Member States to set the required standards for their biosphere reserves to become fully functional and conform to the criteria of the Network’s Statutory Framework.” The effective use of the Periodic Review process plays a critical role in the implementation of this exit strategy.

In the case of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, a recent report of the MAB-ICC (2015) stated the following: “(...) Although activities are under development in the biosphere reserve, the management plans and zonation system do not reflect clearly the value of the three functions of a biosphere reserve. The Advisory Committee therefore concluded that this biosphere reserve does not meet the criteria of the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and recommended that the national authorities: Provide a new zonation system in line with the objectives of the MAB Programme. (...) The Council examined the additional information provided by the National Authorities in response to the request of the Advisory Committee. The authorities informed the Council of the “Studies in view of the redefinition of boundaries of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve” by the International Assistance Panel of World Heritage Programme, which will lead to the homogenization of the zoning system, given the dual designation as both biosphere reserve and World Heritage Site.”

It is encouraging to see that the MAB-ICC report makes explicit reference to the dual designation as a biosphere reserve and a World Heritage property. At the same time, it is unexpected that the MAB-ICC makes an extremely far-reaching recommendation by suggesting a need for “a new zonation system”, while neither providing a clear analytical basis for this conclusion nor any guidance in this regard. The author respectfully notes that the reasoning underpinning the MAB-ICC recommendation is difficult to understand given that the zonation of Río Plátano appears to reflect the biosphere reserve concept and spirit in exemplary fashion despite the use of differing terminology in Honduras. While a more in-depth analysis is beyond the scope and mandate of this report, it is critically important to emphasize that Honduras seems to have embarked on two parallel processes attempting to re-define the zonation of Río Plátano in response to the World Heritage Committee and MAB-ICC, respectively. The full harmonization of both processes and corresponding communication is strongly recommended. It would be tragic if two parallel efforts to finally update and harmonize the international designations with the national legal, policy and management framework again resulted in inconsistencies and misunderstandings.

Recommendation 1

Fully harmonize the parallel efforts in the internationally designated biosphere reserve and the World Heritage property, respectively, including in all corresponding communication.

3. The Way forward: Refining earlier Conclusions and Recommendations**3.1 Embarking on a new World Heritage Nomination**

The advisory mission documented in this report strongly re-affirmed that it is not desirable or even feasible to remove Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve from the List of World Heritage in Danger according to the spatial configuration and conservation approach in place in 1982. The current positive momentum should be used to focus limited resources on one single concerted effort harmonizing the approaches to the national protected area and the international designations as both a biosphere reserve and a natural World Heritage property. There is a consensus on the need for a Significant Boundary Modification and it is now fully understood by the State Party that this procedure amounts to a new World Heritage nomination of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. The option to use the existing logic and configuration of the nationally and internationally recognized biosphere reserve as the framework for the new nomination emerged as the preferable option, as detailed in sub-chapter 2.2.

Recommendation 2

Prioritize the elaboration of a Significant Boundary Modification on the understanding that it amounts to a new nomination.

Recommendation 3

Further assess the feasibility of a new nomination bringing together the legally defined core zone and the entire cultural zone of the biosphere reserve.

3.2 The new Nomination and the List of World Heritage in Danger

The World Heritage Committee has recognized that the recommended new nomination and the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger must be addressed jointly. In the wording of Decision 41 COM 7A.3 (Krakow, 2017) “the significant boundary modification and the efforts to remove the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger are intricately linked and should be regarded and managed as one coherent effort”. This builds upon Decision 40 COM 7A.33 (Istanbul and UNESCO, 2016), which highlighted that “the Desired state of conservation for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR) should be revised once the boundaries of the property have been clarified”. In light of the above conclusions, it follows that a revised DSOCR must refer to the spatial configuration of the new nomination. The revised DSOCR must at the same time address the factors leading to the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Both the new nomination and the DSOCR require the demonstration of compliance with World Heritage requirements. Thereby progress towards a successful nomination can be considered as progress towards the removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Recommendation 4

Actively use the new nomination as an umbrella to structure an updated Desired State of Conservation for the Removal of the Property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR).

The existing DSOCR provides useful guidance and should serve as the foundation of a revised version adapted to the configuration of the new nomination. It is clear that the eventual DSOCR will require further discussion and endorsement on the part of the State Party.

Recommendation 5

Finalize the DSOCR for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve based on the existing draft version and updated elements offered in this report and, if possible, submit it jointly with the upcoming State of Conservation report due in early 2018.

3.3 Implications for the Tentative List

The Operational Guidelines (OG) define a Tentative List (TL) as an "inventory of those properties situated on its territory which each State Party considers suitable for inscription on the World Heritage List" (paragraph 62). Paragraph 64 of the OGs encourages State Parties to "prepare their Tentative Lists with the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, including site managers, local and regional governments, local communities, NGOs and other interested parties and partners." According to paragraph 65 State Parties "shall submit Tentative Lists to the Secretariat, at least one year prior to the submission of any nomination. States Parties are encouraged to re-examine and re-submit their Tentative List at least every ten years." More details, including the current TL form, are available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>.

The main message is that inscription on the TL is a mandatory prerequisite for any World Heritage nomination. Besides, the elaboration of a TL is an opportunity to bring together the widest possible spectrum of stakeholders to identify and discuss national priority areas for the conservation of natural and/or cultural heritage. Honduras is one of a limited number of State Parties to the World Heritage Convention, which to date has never submitted a Tentative List. This is possible because the two Honduran properties on the World Heritage List were submitted and inscribed before the formal TL requirement came in place.

If the State Party wants to have the option to go ahead with the strongly recommended Significant Boundary Modification of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, updating the Honduran Tentative List will be indispensable (see paragraph 165 of the Operational Guidelines). The State Party has two possibilities:

- (i) The State Party could simply fill in and submit the straightforward Tentative List form for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve;
- (ii) The State Party could take advantage of the occasion and embark on a more ambitious national Tentative List exercise by facilitating a structured discussion about possible candidates for future cultural and/or natural World Heritage nominations in Honduras.

While the author encourages a broader discussion about possible World Heritage candidates in Honduras, this report focuses on Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in line with the mandate of the assignment. It was explained to the State Party that the submission of the Tentative List form for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve would not come with any

complex or potentially sensitive commitments. A State Party to the World Heritage Convention is not obliged to submit nominations of any candidate sites on its TL. A State Party can also revise its TL at all times as it sees fit, which includes the option to withdraw candidate sites.

Annex 5 provides a draft of the key sections of a possible TL entry for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve for the State Party to draw upon as it sees fit. The draft will require in-depth discussion, revision and endorsement by the State Party. However, it is recalled in this context that there is no shortage of information on Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. The State Party can draw on a wealth of structured and readily available information, including technical reports and official World Heritage documentation, such as the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value for the property. The TL form for any candidate site can be submitted at any point in time. In principle the State Party could submit the form for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve along with the next State of Conservation report due by 01 February 2018.

Recommendation 6

Finalize the Tentative List form for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve based on the draft offered in this report and, if possible, submit it jointly with the upcoming State of Conservation report due in early 2018.

3.4 Overview of all Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Fully harmonize the parallel efforts in the internationally designated biosphere reserve and the World Heritage property, respectively, including in all corresponding communication.

Recommendation 2

Prioritize the elaboration of a Significant Boundary Modification on the understanding that it amounts to a new nomination.

Recommendation 3

Further assess the feasibility of a new nomination bringing together the legally defined core zone and the entire cultural zone of the biosphere reserve.

Recommendation 4

Actively use the new nomination as an umbrella to structure an updated Desired State of Conservation for the Removal of the Property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR).

Recommendation 5

Finalize the DSOCR for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve based on the existing draft version and updated elements offered in this report and, if possible, submit it jointly with the upcoming State of Conservation report due in early 2018.

Recommendation 6

Finalize the Tentative List form for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve based on the draft offered in this report and, if possible, submit it jointly with the upcoming State of Conservation report due in early 2018.

4. References

Various State of Conservation (SOC) reports by the State Party and WHC/IUCN, respectively, reactive monitoring mission reports and World Heritage Committee Decisions were used as references for this report. All are publicly available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/196>. Particular attention was given to:

- Decision 41 COM 7A.3 (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6949>);
- SOC report by WHC/IUCN dated 2017 (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3501>);
- SOC report by State Party dated 2017 (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/196/documents/>).

Extensive use was also made of information on the UNESCO/MAB available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/related-info/publications/mab-official-documents/>

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Annexes

Annex 1: Agenda, People met and Workshop Participants

Agenda

16 October 2017:	Arrival of consultant and first meeting with ICF (PM)
17 October 2017:	Meetings with ICF team
18 October 2017:	Stakeholder workshop at ICF
19 October 2017:	Meeting with Minister and team (AM), visit of Ciudad Blanca Exhibition (Antigua Casa Presidencial), debriefing with ICF (PM)
20 October 2017:	Departure of Consultant (AM)

Core Team

Marco Espinoza, Susana Ferreira, Marcio Martínez

Workshop at ICF, Tegucigalpa, 18 October 2017

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Meeting with Minister at MiAmbiente+, 19 October 2017

Name	Affiliation	Position
Misael León	Instituto Nacional de Conservación Forestal, Áreas Protegidas y Vida Silvestre (ICF)	Executive Director
Claudia Milagros	Secretaría de Energía, Recursos Naturales, Ambiente y Minas (MiAmbiente+)	Planning Specialist and technical support
Susana Ferreira C.	ICF	Technical Assistant
Marnie Portillo	MiAmbiente+, Dirección de Biodiversidad	Director
José Lenin O'Connor Cano	MiAmbiente+, Dirección de Biodiversidad	Técnico de Cooperación Externa y Movilización de Recursos
José Galdames	Secretaría de Energía, Recursos Naturales, Ambiente y Minas	Minister

Annex 2: Conclusions and Recommendations from 2015 Report

Conclusion 1

Parts of the World Heritage property - as inscribed in 1982 - have lost important conservation values. Furthermore, the legal status of parts of the property was changed in 1997. As formally inscribed to this day, it does not appear feasible to remove Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve from the List of World Heritage in Danger in the foreseeable future. It is unhelpful to restrict the discussion to the currently inscribed World Heritage boundaries and zones, as both are legally obsolete and of limited relevance in today's governance and management for good reasons.

Conclusion 2

In light of new information and analysis, it does not appear appropriate to respond to the challenges in the World Heritage property through a minor boundary modification.

Conclusion 3

While parts of the World Heritage property appear to have lost integrity, it is important to understand that there are large areas assumed to be of comparable conservation importance nearby within the much larger biosphere reserve. It needs to be analyzed in detail, whether the regrettable loss of conservation values and integrity in parts of the World Heritage property areas might be balanced by adding intact areas of highest conservation importance adjacent to the World Heritage property and within the biosphere reserve. The further analysis must critically examine this potential against the demanding requirements of "Outstanding Universal Value" in terms of compliance with World Heritage criteria, integrity, as well as protection and management (see Operational Guidelines, in particular paragraphs 49 – 53 and 78).

Conclusion 4

The wider landscape beyond the enlarged Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve continues to harbor several areas of major conservation interest. Some are formally protected areas while others are in the process of formal designation, such as the vast Karatasca lagoon complex just east of the biosphere reserve. Some of these areas might boast conservation values comparable to the World Heritage property. However, given the existing complexity and the ongoing challenges, these areas and their possible World Heritage potential are not considered a priority at this point in time. The focus of analysis at this point in time should be restricted to the surface area of the biosphere reserve.

Conclusion 5

The changing governance framework of the biosphere reserve, namely the establishment of a "cultural zone" and parallel titling processes, is legally applicable to parts of the World Heritage property according to national legislation. While this has not received major attention under the World Heritage Convention so far, it is clearly relevant. The evolving governance set-up may become even more relevant from a World Heritage perspective if additional parts of the cultural zone were to be included a new World Heritage nomination. This presents conservation opportunities and close coordination and communication with the corresponding initiatives and involved actors is recommended.

Conclusion 6

While a possible mixed approach, i.e. a new nomination under both cultural and natural criteria, appears premature at this stage, the important archeological heritage of Río Plátano must be fully considered in its governance and management. Such consideration would no doubt be a useful foundation and investment should the State Party desire to embark on a mixed approach at some point in the future.

Recommendation 1

Embark on a significant boundary modification process, which amounts to a new nomination document being submitted to UNESCO, and subsequently evaluated by IUCN. This significant boundary modification should consider and further refine the following parameters as the basis for defining the boundaries of a revised inscribed area and a revised World Heritage buffer zone:

- Use the existing external boundaries of the biosphere reserve as the external boundaries of the possible future World Heritage buffer zone, also as a means of harmonization between the biosphere reserve and the envisaged future World Heritage property.
- Include the entire core zone of the biosphere reserve in the revised area proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List, thereby extending the coverage of the Rio Plátano watershed and almost doubling the coverage of closed humid forest;
- Jointly with the core zone of the biosphere reserve, include contiguous parts of the cultural zone of the biosphere reserve in the revised area as detailed in recommendation 2.

Recommendation 2

Systematically review the cultural zone of the biosphere reserve according to its potential to meet World Heritage requirements (“Outstanding Universal Value”, i.e. compliance with World Heritage criteria and required conditions of integrity, adequate protection and management), taking into account connectivity, ecosystem coverage and agreement on the part of indigenous peoples and local communities. Inclusion of areas of the cultural zone in the revised boundaries to be nominated should be decided at the level of territorial councils so as to avoid new boundaries being created that are not already part of the local governance, and to facilitate communication and negotiation and clear rights and responsibilities.

Recommendation 3

Make full use of all information sources, including the wealth of information generated by PROTEP and the SIMONI monitoring system (*Sistema de Monitoreo Integral*) and engage in corresponding partnerships.

Recommendation 4

Elaborate a costed proposal for a significant boundary modification initiative as a basis for required fund-raising and approach potential supporters.

Recommendation 5

Seek direct communication with the IUCN World Heritage Programme and the World Heritage Centre and inform the World Heritage Committee of any relevant State Party intentions, plans and activities using State of Conservation (SOC) and International Assistance Request (IAR) reporting with additional direct communication as desired.

Annex 3: Decision 41 COM 7A.3 (Krakow, 2017)

Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (Honduras) (N 196)

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC/17/41.COM/7A,
2. Recalling Decision **40 COM 7A.33**, adopted at its 40th session (Istanbul/UNESCO, 2016),
3. Commends the State Party and governmental and non-governmental partners on further progress made in integrated monitoring and granting negotiated local access to land and natural resources, and encourages the State Party and partners to continue and enhance these efforts;
4. Welcomes the State Party's effort to accomplish an extensive titling process in favour of indigenous peoples that are settled within and beyond the limits of the property;
5. Notes the efforts made by the State Party in order to control illegal activities, however reiterates its concern that human, financial and logistical resources allocated by the State Party continue to be inadequate to address these challenges;
6. Recommends that the State Party maintain the overflights and ground level surveys to detect illegal activities and to detect illegal new settlements as early as possible to enable immediate responses, avoiding evictions after the full establishment of settlements;
7. Also encourages the State Party to further follow up on the conclusions and recommendations of the discussions facilitated by the provisions of the 2015 International Assistance, by continuing the consultation and negotiation process underpinning elaboration of a proposal for a significant boundary modification, which fully considers the interests, rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples, Afro-Honduran and Ladino (mestizo) communities, with the technical support of the World Heritage Centre and IUCN, as required;
8. Considers that the significant boundary modification and the efforts to remove the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger are intricately linked and should be regarded and managed as one coherent effort;
9. Recalls its request to the State Party to report on the possible impacts of the Patuca III project, and requests the State Party to ensure that current and potential impacts on the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property are specifically assessed, in line with IUCN's World Heritage Advice Note on Environmental Assessment, and to ensure that the implementation of this project will not be permitted before this assessment is completed;
10. Also requests the State Party to submit to the World Heritage Centre, by **1 February 2018**, an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above, for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 42nd session in 2018;
11. **Decides to retain Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (Honduras) on the List of World Heritage in Danger.**

Annex 4: Draft Update of the Desired State of Conservation (DSOCR)

1. Overarching orientation of the DSOOCR for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

The approach for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger includes the elaboration and eventual submission of a Significant Boundary Modification. This necessarily implies a new World Heritage nomination of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in a substantially revised configuration. In order to create the conditions permitting the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger compliance with all World Heritage requirements is needed. The same compliance also needs to be demonstrated in any World Heritage nomination. This implies major, if not full, overlap of the requirements for both related efforts.

The tentative decision to embark on a Significant Boundary Modification and the corresponding need for a new nomination is a critical component of the overarching context of the desired removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger. Consequently, an updated Desired state of conservation for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR) is required. Elements for such an update are proposed hereafter. They require State Party consideration jointly with the existing draft DSOOCR and eventual endorsement for subsequent official submission.

2. Structure and elements of a revised DSOOCR

Helpful guidance to elaborate a DSOOCR is available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/>. This guidance proposes the following “key elements”:

- Indicators to monitor Outstanding Universal Value;
- A rationale for the indicators selected;
- A method of verification for each indicator;
- A timeframe for the realization of the DSOOCR.

The existing draft DSOOCR developed by the State Party follows the recommended structure. Therefore, the existing draft DSOOCR can readily serve as the foundation for a revised update, which explicitly integrates the DSOOCR with the new nomination. Consequently, the revised DSOOCR will have to address the revised spatial configuration and the threats resulting in the inscription of the existing property on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The corresponding Decision 35 COM 7B.31 (Paris, 2011) lists the main threats as follows (emphasis added): “(...) Considers that the combination of threats from **illegal logging, illegal occupation**, the **reduced capacity of the State Party** and the **general deterioration of law and order** and the **security situation** in the region constitute a serious threat to its Outstanding Universal Value (...)”. Proposed elements of a revised DSOOCR are discussed against this backdrop hereafter:

- From the perspective of conservation values (compliance with World Heritage criteria), the State Party has the opportunity to document that the new nomination will significantly increase the surface area of the closed humid broadleaf forest within the property by adding some 90,000 ha to the currently around 120,000 ha of this forest type. This part of a future property of some 210,000 ha of a contiguous forest would coincide with the strictly protected core zone of the biosphere reserve;
- The recommended inclusion of the entire cultural zone would add some 425,000 ha to the above 210,000 ha of the core zone of the biosphere reserve. The joint surface area is substantially larger than the existing property. Thereby, the new nomination adds to the case for the importance of the nominated area;

- From the perspective of integrity, the new nomination puts the State Party in a position to argue that the revised configuration is in several ways superior to the existing property. The combined area of the core and cultural zones of the biosphere reserve would fully demonstrate the two key particularities of the existing property. First, the inclusion of the entire river from source to mouth and, second, the inclusion of the enormous landscape diversity in the coastal plains. The new nomination, however, would not only increase the surface area but also add ecosystem diversity in the northeast of the nominated area;
- The management objective for the core zone of the biosphere reserve is an unambiguous focus on strict conservation. The State Party has already identified adequate integrity indicators (forest cover in response to the threat of illegal logging; and monitoring of illegal human presence) and measures (overflights, remote sensing, patrolling on the ground), which can readily be used;
- Given that the inclusion of the entire core zone of the biosphere reserve would also include an area of active archeological prospecting and excavations, the new spatial configuration of the nominated area would have to consider possible direct and indirect threats stemming from archeological work;
- The integrity indicators in the inhabited and used cultural zone need to be developed. The well-documented efforts to negotiate rights and responsibilities are an important foundation for the development of such indicators. The key reference in the Operational Guidelines is paragraph 119, which defines “sustainable use”. The challenge is to identify the key natural values of the cultural zone and agree on acceptable use of natural resources in line with those values. The corresponding section of the existing DSOCR contains useful elements, but requires updating to reflect progress in terms of granting rights to indigenous peoples and cooperation with local stakeholders and rights-holders more broadly;
- The nomination needs to document the conservation values of the cultural zone. As noted in the existing DSOCR, both local rights and local responsibilities need to be discussed, negotiated and documented. It needs to be demonstrated that the governance and management in place is adequate to maintain the conservation values of the cultural zone. The corresponding section of the existing DSOCR contains useful elements but requires updating to reflect progress in this regard;
- Both the DSCOR and the new nomination will have to demonstrate that the government has regained control of the biosphere reserve and the Honduran Mosquitia more broadly. The effectiveness of the management of the biosphere reserve is one indicator. In the core zone of the buffer zone, it is relatively straightforward to assess whether the law can or cannot be enforced. As the security issues go well beyond the level of nature conservation, evidence of a broader, inter-institutional governmental effort needs to be demonstrated and documented. In practice, this will require the establishment of a functional inter-institutional mechanism to coordinate the governmental response to security concerns. Such a mechanism could build upon the earlier Ad Hoc Group and should also be linked to the new nomination;
- In the buffer zone, it needs to be demonstrated how management contributes to stabilizing the agricultural frontier and illegal resource extraction in the nearby nominated area.

Annex 5: Draft Tentative List entry for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

This annex proposes draft text for the key sections of a recommended Tentative List entry for Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve for use by the State Party as it sees fit. The draft follows the official form, further explained and available for download at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>. The draft draws on the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value of the existing property Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.

Description:

Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 1982 as one of the pioneering natural World Heritage sites in all of Latin America and the Caribbean. Even at the time of inscription, it was the country's largest protected area extending across roughly 350,000 hectares¹ of the Honduran Mosquitia. At the national level, however, the nominated area has since been substantially enlarged to some 630,000 ha with an additional buffer zone of approximately 200,000 ha. The IUCN evaluation in 1982 emphasized two remarkable characteristics supporting the case for the area's World Heritage merits in addition to the large block of intact broadleaf forest. First, the protected area encompasses the entire watershed of a major river, the Río Plátano, from the headwaters in a densely forested mountain landscape to the river mouth on the Caribbean Coast. Second, even though the protected area is best known for including one of the most important remnants of closed humid broadleaf forest, it also encompasses numerous completely different ecosystems and habitats. The entire northern part towards the Caribbean coast is in fact comprised of an exceptionally diverse landscape mosaic, boasting a series of coastal lagoons, remote beaches, rare pine forest types, savannahs and wetlands. The ecosystem mosaic is home to an extraordinary diversity of life. Further adding to its importance, Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is functionally linked to several other important protected areas and indigenous conservation areas, even across the international border with neighboring Nicaragua.

The nominated area has a very long and ongoing human history. It is no coincidence that the nominated area overlaps with a vast National Archeological Park predating the establishment of any protected areas dedicated to nature conservation in the entire Honduran Mosquito. Notable archaeological values, such as major Pre-Columbian artifacts and petroglyphs have been found both in the existing property and the much larger area to be nominated. Surveys and excavations are ongoing, requiring communication and coordination between authorities in charge of natural and archeological heritage to manage possible competing interests. It is conceivable that the results of ongoing archeological research might justify and stimulate the consideration of cultural World Heritage criteria in addition to the currently proposed natural criteria in the future.

Unlike the smaller existing property, the nominated area adopts the configuration and zonation of the nationally and internationally designated biosphere reserve established in 1997. This means that there is a much larger zone comprised of one of the most important remnants of the once immense humid broadleaf forests of Central America and Southern Mexico dedicated exclusively to nature conservation. It is surrounded by a buffer zone in the south and west in an effort to halt the agricultural frontier. Mestizo (Ladino) communities have been granted rights in this buffer zone in order to stabilize land and

¹ ICF data challenge this officially inscribed surface area, as recent measurements suggest some 290,000 hectares only. Immediate verification is strongly recommended.

resource use. As the most profound change initiated in 1997, the nominated area includes a cultural zone of some 425,000 ha. Following many years of negotiation, indigenous Pech, Tawahka and Miskito peoples and local communities of African descent (Garífuna, Afrohondureños) have been granted rights permitting them to continue to live on their land and sustainably use its rich natural resources. This proposal to explicitly include inhabited and used areas is made on the grounds of paragraph 119 of the Operational Guidelines which states that World Heritage properties “may support a variety of ongoing and proposed uses that are ecologically and culturally sustainable and which may contribute to the quality of life of communities concerned” on condition that “such sustainable use or any other change does not impact adversely on the Outstanding Universal Value of the property”. It deserves to be recalled in this context that large parts of the existing property have been inhabited and used at all times, including at the time of the inscription of Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in its current configuration in 1982.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value:

As noted above, the existing property was recognized as having World Heritage merits due to its significant block of contiguous humid broadleaf forest, the coverage of an entire and major river from its source to its mouth on the Atlantic Coast and the exceptional diversity of the landscape mosaic in the coastal plains. The nominated area builds upon that rationale, while substantially adding surface area and ecosystem diversity. Compared to the existing property, the most obvious difference of the nominated area is its much larger scale of some 630,000 hectares, an enormous area by any standard and in particular by the standards of a relatively small country. Unlike the existing property, which included some 120,000 hectares of contiguous dense broadleaf forest, the nominated area includes the vast majority of that entire forest block, some 210,000 hectares fully coinciding with the core zone of the biosphere reserve.

Criteria met [see Paragraph 77 of the Operational Guidelines]:
(Please tick the box corresponding to the proposed criteria and justify the use of each below)

(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)	(vii)	(viii)	(ix)	(ix)
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Unlike the existing property, which was inscribed according to all natural criteria, the envisaged nomination will focus on criteria (ix) and (x), while considering criterion (vii). Criterion (viii), which focuses on geological and geomorphological values, was considered marginal and is therefore not being proposed. Cultural criteria might be added at a later point in time.

Criterion (vii)

The particular natural beauty of the nominated area rests on the exceptional variety of the terrain, landscape and ecosystems. The vast protected area is home to rarely visited and almost impenetrable forested mountains reaching 1,418 m.a.s.l. at Punta Piedra, but also includes markedly distinct savannahs, pine forest and vast wetlands towards the coastal plains of the Caribbean Coast. The spectacular lagoons near the coast, namely Laguna Brus and Laguna Ibans, are home to manatees and major bird colonies, while also serving as nurseries for fish and many other forms of aquatic life.

Criterion (ix)

The Río Plátano is one of the major rivers of Honduras. Flowing freely from its mountainous headwaters to the Caribbean Sea, uninterrupted by any human infrastructure, it is the heart of the nominated area. This permits the continuation of the full range of natural processes along the entire altitudinal and ecological range. The contiguous block of dense tropical rainforest with smaller areas of rare elfin forest on the highest in the mountainous south area is widely recognized as being among the most intact and most valuable tropical forests of the entire Meso-American region. The natural wealth of the dense forests is complemented by the many other distinct yet interlinked elements of landscape mosaic. The estuarine, coastal and marine ecosystems, mangrove swamps and pine savannah form an extraordinary, largely intact web of life in the remote Honduran Mosquitia.

Criterion (x)

The Honduran Mosquitia is renowned as a globally important stronghold of biodiversity. The nominated area is to include a much larger and diverse representation of that natural wealth than the existing property. Recent research confirmed that the nominated area continues to keep many of its secrets; new research is certain to reveal new species. Today, at least 586 species of vascular plants are documented. Across all investigated taxonomic groups, Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is home to impressive proportions of the fauna of Honduras, which is part of the Mesoamerican Biodiversity Hotspot. The more than 721 species of vertebrates include more than half of all mammals known in Honduras, such as the critically endangered Mexican Spider Monkey, the endangered Central American Tapir, the vulnerable Giant Anteater and the West Indian Manatee, as well as the near-threatened Jaguar and White-lipped Peccary. Other charismatic species are Puma, Ocelot, Jaguarundi and Margay, Neotropical Otter, White-throated Capuchin Monkey and Mantled Howler Monkey. The endangered Great Green Macaw, the vulnerable Great Curassow and Scarlet Macaw and the near-threatened Guiana Crested Eagle and harpy eagle stand out among the impressive 411 documented species of birds, along with Jabiru, King Vulture and the majestic Harpy Eagle. The 108 species of reptiles and amphibians comprise several rare poisonous snakes and 4 species marine turtles reproducing on the coast (Loggerhead, Leatherback, Green Turtle and Hawksbill Turtle).

Statements of authenticity and/or integrity

As the name implies, the spatial approach to the protected area to be nominated largely follows natural watershed boundaries. The heart of this watershed is the Río Plátano, which is protected from its headwaters to its mouth. The Plátano River is a major landscape feature and corridor connecting all the landscape elements from the rugged mountains to the coastal plains. Unlike the existing property, the nominated area encompasses the bulk of the block of dense humid forest under coherent and strict protection. Compared to the existing property, the configuration is further strengthened by including a much larger area of the conspicuously diverse landscape east of the river mouth. Most of the vast area, including the coast, is remote and difficult to access, which contributes to the high degree of naturalness, while admittedly also creating management and law enforcement challenges. The vast cultural zone acknowledges the presence, rights and needs of indigenous peoples and local communities. Sustainable use of natural resources is accepted as long as it does not deteriorate the natural values or ecosystem productivity. The resource-dependent indigenous peoples and local communities can be regarded as a first line of defense against illicit activities threatening the integrity of the cultural zone.

Comparison with other similar properties:

A full comparative analysis is beyond the scope of the Tentative List. A more in-depth analysis is to be carried out as an integral element of the envisaged new nomination. The below overview has a focus on the most obvious sites with comparable nature conservation values; analysis is restricted to brief comments on the most striking differences in the form of bullet points.

Given that the area is being proposed to enable a Significant Boundary Modification of an existing property, it is also relevant to compare the envisaged new nomination with the existing property. One major difference in favor of the new nomination is the much larger surface area, which would make it one of the largest World Heritage properties in all of Mesoamerica. As mentioned in the integrity section, it deserves to be noted that the nominated area includes the bulk of the exceptionally large and intact remnant of humid broadleaf forest, whereas the existing property only encompasses slightly more than half of that key area. Similarly, the nominated area adds substantial surface area of various ecosystems in the coastal lowlands, also adding ecosystems, which are not included in the existing property, such as freshwater lagoons further inland markedly distinct from the coastal lagoons and rare coastal vegetation in the northeast of the biosphere reserve.

Ancient Maya City and Protected Tropical Forests of Calakmul, Campeche (Mexico)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1061>

- Similarities in terms of the coincidence of high cultural (archeological) and natural values, which is reflected in the mixed approach of the property;
- Very distinct geology, hydrology and forest and other vegetation types;
- Much more modest spatial scale;
- Much lower complexity of the landscape mosaic;
- Coastal and marine elements and influences are missing;
- Lack of rivers (karst systems of the Yucatan Peninsula).

Sian Ka'an (Mexico)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/410>

- Similarities in terms of the coincidence of high cultural (archeological) and natural values; unlike Calakmul Sian Ka'an is not inscribed as a mixed property though;
- Similarities in terms of scale and coverage of terrestrial, coastal, freshwater and marine ecosystems;
- Lack of rivers (karst systems of the Yucatan Peninsula).
- The most striking differences are (i) the central importance of a major river in the area to be nominated, and (ii) the large block of dense humid forest in Honduras, a forest type very distinct from the forests stocking on the limestone of the Yucatan Peninsula.

Tikal National Park (Guatemala)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/64>

- Similarities in terms of the coincidence of high cultural (archeological) and natural values, which is reflected in the mixed approach of the property;
- Lack of major watercourses;
- Lack of coastal-marine areas or influences;
- Inferior order of magnitude in terms of surface area and ecosystem diversity; the surface area of the Guatemalan national park is less than 10% of the area to be nominated.

Area de Conservación Guanacaste (Costa Rica)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/928>

- Comparable in scale and landscape diversity and complexity;
- Comparable and strongly overlapping species assemblages;
- Unlike the area to be nominated, the coastal and marine elements and influences stem from the ecologically distinct Pacific;
- More detailed comparable analysis is strongly required for the purpose of a possible nomination.

Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves / La Amistad National Park (Costa Rica / Panama)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/205>

- Comparable in scale and landscape diversity and complexity;
- Comparable and strongly overlapping species assemblages;
- More detailed comparable analysis is strongly required for the purpose of a possible nomination.

Darién National Park (Panama)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/159>

- Comparable in scale and landscape diversity and complexity;
- Comparable and strongly overlapping species assemblages;
- More detailed comparable analysis is strongly required for the purpose of a possible nomination.

Los Katíos National Park (Colombia)

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/711>

- Much more modest scale, the Colombian national park has a surface area only slightly exceeding 10% of the area to be nominated (while noting contiguity with Darién National Park in Panama, see above);
- Lack of comparable ecosystem diversity;
- While the national park is near the coast and sea, it does not encompass coastal and marine areas;
- The Atrato River crosses the Colombian property. Unlike in the case of the Río Plátano, the management of the Atrato River is largely out of the control of protected area authorities.