Colombia is an extraordinarily geographically diverse country, with landscapes ranging from coastal pastur- 
lands and rainforests, extensive plains and low tropical 
forests, to varied ecosystems on the Andean mountain 
rang e. In what is only 0.7% of the world’s continental 
area, it hosts almost 10% of the world’s biological diver-
sity.

Nearly 80% of the population of Colombia is located on 
the three branches and numerous valleys of the Andean 
mountain range, which crisscrosses the country. Part 
of the population is involved in agricultural production 
(primarily coffee) and cattle ranching. The subsistence 
economy of 70% of the rural population has turned to 
wood extraction, harvesting vegetable fibers and hunt-
ing activities. But, because of the long sociopolitical 
crisis more of the population is migrating to the already 
over-populated urban centers.

Fundación Natura, the Rainforest Alliance’s partner in 
Colombia, is a local conservation organization founded 
in 1983 which initially focused its conservation and com-
munity work on the tropical lowland forests in the Chocó 
and Amazon regions. These areas were identified early 
on as hotbeds of biodiversity. In addition, the forests 
remained largely intact, making them obvious areas for 
conservation. Later, Fundación Natura identified the 
eastern area of the Oriental mountain range as a high 
priority area for conservation due to the quickly dimin-
ishing oak forests found along its slopes.

Andean oak forests are said to host an even higher bio-
diversity (more 30,000 plant species) than the Amazon 
regions, in smaller areas and at high altitudes (5,400 to 
8,300 ft above sea level) with temperatures that reach 
54°F—unusually cold for tropical species. Oak trees 
establish complex relationships with other important 
plant species, like smaller shrubs, palms and epiphytes 
to create a uniquely biodiverse environment that is host 
to 225 species of birds. Some of the more exceptional 
bird species are: gallito de roca (Rupicola peruviana),
las pavas de monte (Penelope montagni) and humming-
birds. The region also boasts more than 70 species of 
mammals, many endangered, including the spectacled 
bear (Tremarctos ornatus), white-tailed deer (Odocoileus 
virginianus y Mazama rufina) and the river otter (Lutra 
longicaudis).

Although this area of the country has not suffered from 
any major population migrations, the traditional land 
use techniques of slash-and-burn agriculture in frag-
mented forest areas have endangered an important and 
unique high-altitude Páramo and upper montane for-
est system. Páramo, which is found only at the highest 
elevations, is a uniquely Andean ecosystem that re-
sembles the Swiss Alpine forests. The vegetation is low, 
plants and animals are small in size (to minimize loss of 
heat) and must be able to adapt to temperatures below 
freezing. Working with the residents of the area, Fun-
dación Natura was able to convince the government to 
declare the area a natural protected zone in 1993 under 
the name of Santuario de Flora y Fauna de Guanentá-
Alto Río Fonce. Additionally, in 1997, Fundación Natura 
bought nearly 1,830 acres (740 hectares) of forest and 
50 acres (20 hectares) of open space next to a park in 
the municipalities of Encino, Charalá and Coromoro), an 
area that was going to be turned into cattle farm. This 
park was named Cachalú Biological Reserve. Fundación
Natura was also able to secure the most vulnerable area at the birth of the Virolin River.

Fundación Natura has obtained support from diverse communities and government institutions. Its main projects include identifying alternative uses of forest resources, recuperating local traditions regarding resource use, characterizing the production systems, diagnosing hunting activity, organizing environmental education planning workshops, and finally, giving technical support to the government’s Parks Unit of the Ministry of Environment who is in charge of the Park.

Fundación Natura has put together a larger program called “Programa Andes Tropicales,” which aims at identifying a conservation and sustainable use model that can be applied in other regions with similar characteristics. The area of action includes the 1,830 acres of the Cachalú Biological Reserve mainly composed of high Andean oak forest, plus, the areas around it (a total of 323,708 acres or 131,000 hectares) defined as pasture land which contains secondary forests in different regeneration stages.