



Colombia is an extraordinarily geographically diverse country, with landscapes ranging from coastal pasturelands and rainforests, extensive plains and low tropical forests, to varied ecosystems on the Andean mountain range. In what is only 0.7% of the world's continental area, it hosts almost 10% of the world's biological diversity.

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 hunting 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 community 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 diminishing oak forests found along its slopes.

Andean oak forests are said to host an even higher biodiversity (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 hummingbirds. 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 fragmented forest areas have endangered an important and unique high-altitude Páramo and upper montane forest system. Páramo, which is found only at the highest elevations, is a uniquely Andean ecosystem that resembles 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, Fundación 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.